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Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21954/ou.ro.0000eec4>

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**CHINESE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF HUMOUR  
IN BRITISH ACADEMIC LECTURES**

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Centre for Research in Education and Educational Technology

The Open University

May 2012

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# Acknowledgement

I am in great debt to many people who have supported me and made this thesis possible.

My supervisors, Prof. Joan Swann and Prof. Guy Cook, have guided me through the PhD., continuously inspiring me, repeatedly reading and criticising the thesis, and making sure that not a single joke has made it out alive. Words are not enough to express my immense gratitude for their tireless and unwavering support. I am also grateful to Dr. Kieran O'Halloran and Dr. Caroline Tagg, who supervised me at various stages of my PhD.

Special thanks to Prof. Hilary Nesi, who supervised my Master's dissertation, introduced the subject of this thesis to me, and lent me immense supports throughout the years.

Without her, I might still be wondering what those students were laughing about in class.

I thank the Open University for funding my MRes and PhD study, and the staff at CREET including Anne Forward, Carol Johns-MacKenzie, June Ayres and Linda Nash for their continuous and always timely support. Thank you to my comrades: Afra, Julia, Mabelle, and Pauline. You know what I want to say to you. Keep forging ahead! Guozhi, Maria, and Liang calmed me down before and/or greeted me after my viva. I'm so glad I have friends like you guys.

I have learned a great deal from my examiners Professor Nancy D. Bell and Professor Theresa Lilis. Thank you so much for being interested in and paying much detailed attention to my work. Theresa lent me immense support during my final revisions. I enjoyed the talks! I would also like to express my gratitude to Barbara Mayor for being such a wonderful chair of my viva.

I cannot forget the students and lecturers who participated in my research. You are the stars



of the thesis, yet I cannot reveal your names. Without you, this thesis would not have been possible!

Finally, my parents and sister, who never stopped caring for me, even though they may not understand what I've been doing for all this time. Thanks to Mike for walking, brewing, and keeping the bears in order, Sahoko and Scott for the fun talks, and last but not least, Stephen for making me believe in myself and the possibility of a different life.

# Abstract

My PhD study explores humour in British academic lectures and Chinese students' perceptions of it. The research interest was derived from my personal experience as an international student in Britain, when I repeatedly encountered occasions on which the lecturers' jokes fell flat for me. Britain is one of the most popular destinations for international students, but there are hardly any investigations into humour in academic contexts or international students' understanding of it, and none on Chinese students' problems with humour in lectures. In my study, instances of humour, referred to as 'humour episodes' (HEs), were identified and analysed in a large number of lectures recorded in the British Academic Spoken English (BASE) corpus and nine academic lectures recorded by me. Some Chinese students, non-Chinese students and all of the lecturers at the lectures in my corpus, commented on selected HEs in interviews and group discussions.

Analysis of the HEs was informed by interactional sociolinguistic and pragmatic theories. Major formal, semantic, and functional properties of humour in the lectures were identified. Humour arose from the incongruous interplay between these properties. The lecturers used humour to carry out teaching tasks and interpersonal activities. Humour heightened the lecturers' stances toward their topics. These stances embodied sociocultural values.

The Chinese students had evident problems comprehending their lecturers' humour. Some expressed a feeling of alienation at having to laugh with other classmates without understanding the cause. The lecturers were often unaware of the Chinese students' perceptions of their humour, and sometimes appeared to be insensitive to their negative feelings. Expression of stance in the humour was particularly problematic to the Chinese

students, but they tended to consider it peripheral to the main purpose of their studies. My study has implications for Chinese students' experience in British universities, and the internationalisation of British higher education.

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# **1. Introduction**

## **1.1 Rationale of this study**

### **1.1.1. The initial interest**

The research interest of this thesis derives from my personal experience as an international student in England. During this time, I repeatedly found myself in situations in which other people around me, including many native speakers, suddenly burst into laughter leaving me feeling confused. These situations occurred both in my daily conversations with native speakers, and in academic contexts, such as lectures and seminars. In the former case, I would - if I was brave enough - interrupt the conversation and ask for clarification. In retrospect, I often ended up asking questions like 'what does "bugger" mean'? However, in academic lectures, the fleeting nature of these 'sudden' bursts of laughter, together with the pressure to keep up with the lecture, allowed little opportunity to reflect on what I had missed and how important it might have been. Gradually I became used to ignoring the laughter and concentrating on taking notes, and so this incomprehension continued to occur with few means for me to appreciate why. The effect of this incomprehension was alienating and demotivating. It led me to believe that my English language competence was insufficient, kept me from actively participating in the lectures and, eventually, from interacting with the lecturers or native speakers after class. As a result, I preferred to make friends with Chinese students. It was during talks with other Chinese students that I realised that I was not the only one who had experienced the difficulty.

Upon reflection, on some of these occasions when I could not laugh with other people, the laughter was in response to certain words, phrases or historical incidents that were

unfamiliar to me, such as ‘bugger’. However, it seemed that often I understood the words and phrases, but still failed to notice or appreciate what had been funny. Typical examples, although I cannot recall the exact words, involved references to politicians such as the Prime Minister, the critical attitude towards whom was almost shocking to me as someone from a state where authority and power are treated with reverence. Reflecting on these experiences, I became increasingly curious as to what it was actually that had fallen flat for me - had it been the jokes told, the swear words, or the attitude to authority? I also found myself wondering what had caused my inability to laugh on these occasions - had it been the lack of vocabulary and local knowledge, or so-called cultural shock?

An intuitive answer to these questions is to say that it is all a matter of ‘humour’ - a term that is ubiquitous in everyday discourse, and very often considered to correlate with laughter. In the English mass media and popular culture, there is a recurrent reference to the so-called ‘English humour’. The social anthropologist Fox (2005), in a popular book based on her daily observations and academic research, suggests that humour ‘rules’ conversations between English people: ‘it is our “default mode”; it is like breathing; we cannot function without it’ (ibid.: 402). This much vaunted ‘rule’ of English humour, although anecdotal, was consistent with my early experience as an overwhelmed foreign student in England. For the purpose of starting the argument, it appeared sensible to attribute my incomprehension in the laughter events to humour, but this immediately led to further questions - what is humour? Is it pervasive in English academic lectures? What are the instances of humour in academic lectures? How does it affect international students’ understanding in lectures? I discussed these questions with my supervisor when I was preparing for my Master’s degree dissertation. She encouraged me to pursue this interest, and introduced to me the British Academic Spoken English (BASE) corpus as a means of

doing so (a detailed introduction to BASE is included in §3.2.2). In BASE, repeated laughter is tagged, enabling me to locate potential instances of humour. I carried out a review of the events with laughter recorded in BASE as a part of my Master's dissertation. At the same time, I started to research previous academic investigations of humour and related topics. The complexity demonstrated by the instances of humour identified in BASE (§1.1.2) and a lack of academic investigations into humour in academic contexts revealed in the search of literature (§1.1.3) indicated the potential for further fruitful study on this subject. It is this study that I have undertaken in this thesis.

### **1.1.2. Search for humour in the BASE corpus**

Employing the techniques to be described in §3.2.2, a large number of speech events involving laughter was located and extracted from the transcripts and video recordings stored in BASE. These extracts were a valuable resource as they allowed me to scrutinise instances that were similar to the laughter events I encountered in classrooms. Meanwhile, a literature review of humour in general and in academic contexts was conducted (see §2.2-3), during which a working definition of humour was identified (§1.2). The large number of humour instances identified in BASE supplied evidence of the prevalence of humour in British academic lectures (see §4.1). Below are some examples:

Example 1, the surviving dinosaur

- 1 Lah25: Well I'll just begin by a a slight sort of #, introduction when I arrived at <name of
- 2 university> # what seems like a lifetime ago but was only thirty-one years ago in
- 3 nineteen-sixty-eight, # I would think probably about forty per cent of the members of
- 4 staff, were, Marxists E P Thompson of course was the the doyen of the # of Marxist
- 5 British Marxist historians and was was here in the social history centre, and a straw

6 poll conducted amongst # first year basic one students in a lecture in nineteen-sixty-  
7 nine, revealed that something like forty per cent of the students # saw themselves as  
8 either Marxist or sympathetic to Marxism, #, times have obviously changed and #  
9 now when Marx is brought up as a topic # I'm wheeled out as one of the surviving  
10 dinosaurs as it were in the department, # most of the remaining Marxists either being  
11 dead or long departed or have become Liberal Democrats  
12 SS: <laughter>

(ahlct025)

#### Example 2, things giving you happiness

1 Lps16: you can think about X and Y as being anything you like, okay it could be #  
2 it could be that, the two things which you think of as giv-, as giving you a lot of  
3 happiness over which you have preferences, are, #, new clothes and C-Ds, or it  
4 might be, economics lectures and accountancy lectures

5 SS: <laughter>

6 Lps16: anything you like

(pslct016)

#### Example 3 - the French revolution

1 Lah20: you may have noticed I was sort of getting rather # , enthusiastic and carried away  
2 at the end of the last one I was sort of almost # like I sort of started at the beginning  
3 about someone standing on a coffee table and s- shouting to arms citizens,  
4 as if I was going to sort of , leap up on the desk and say to arms let's storm,  
5 the Rootes Social Building

6 SS: <laughter>

(ahlct020)

The above examples were identified using laughter as a cue of humour. However, as will be discussed in detail in §3.2.2, humour does not always trigger laughter, and nor is



laughter always a sign of humour. Actually, there are many instances of so-called dry humour, which receive scarce or no responses from the audience. Irony and sarcasm, as discussed by scholars like Kotthoff (2003) and Nelms (2001), often invite no obvious reactions. It may be inferred that such humour is particularly problematic for international students, because, without any cues, a student may be unaware of his/her incomprehension or lack of comprehension. I discovered one such incidence when talking to a tutor of my Masters course some time after my graduation. He mentioned that he used to ask the students (the majority of my classmates were international students) to read aloud Edward Lear's poem, *The Owl and the Pussy Cat*, and waited to see the reactions when people looked up 'pussy' in their dictionaries. According to him, some of the students laughed quietly, but I could recall no special reactions from either myself or my classmates, and it was not until this conversation that I learned the taboo meaning of 'pussy'. Humour with no obvious responses has been attended to in several studies including Bell (2009a, 2009c), Bell and Attardo (2010), and Holmes (2000) (details are reviewed in §3.2.2), and is included in the current study.

### **1.1.3. Search for gaps of research in literature**

The search for relevant literature was carried out in parallel to the review of the BASE data. At the broad level, humour theories from philosophy, psychology, psychoanalysis and evolutionary psychology were reviewed. The literature shows how complicated and eclectic the study of humour is. Four schools are highly influential: release theories, superiority theories, evolutionary theories and incongruity theories. These are discussed in §2.1 together with linguistic/applied linguistic research on humour. At the more local level,

three areas of research are recognised to be of direct relevance to the current study. They are humour in academic lectures, Chinese students' perceptions of humour in British<sup>1</sup> academic lectures, and classroom discourse.

### **Humour in academic lectures**

A substantial body of research investigating humour in academic lectures (Aylor and Oppliger, 2003; Bryant et al., 1979; Bryant et al., 1980; Bryant and Zillmann, 1989; Frymier et al., 2008; Gorham and Christophel, 1990; Kaplan and Pascoe, 1977; Kozlova, 2008; Neuliep, 1991; Wanzer and Frymier, 1999; Wanzer et al., 2006; White, 2001; Ziv, 1988; Ziyaeemehr et al., 2011) has been carried out in the fields of communication studies and psychology. Most of these studies circulated questionnaires to some university students asking them to provide instances of humour, and then categorised these instances. In addition to these surveys, two unpublished PhD theses in the U.S. (Kozlova, 2008; Nelms, 2001) explored humour in academic contexts. Nelms video recorded over 40 university lectures, and interviewed the tutors and students regarding the uses of sarcasm in the classes. Kozlova adopted similar methods but her study concerned humour delivered by international teaching assistants in the U.S. It should be pointed out that all of the studies referred to above were conducted in the U.S. Research into humour in university lectures has not emerged in England until the recent publication of Nesi (2012), which studies the quantitative patterns and functions of laughter in the BASE lectures. This indicates a gap for research.

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<sup>1</sup> 'England', 'Britain', and 'the U.K.' are often referred to interchangeably even in academic writing. Many of the studies I reviewed involve only international students in England, but somehow consider themselves to be about the students in Britain. This may also reflect the fact that the majority (84% in the years 2010/11 (HESA, 2012)) of international students in Britain are at English universities. Moreover, the data in the British Academic Spoken English (BASE) corpus was also recorded in two English universities. Hereafter in the thesis, I will use the terms 'England', 'Britain', and 'U.K.' interchangeably despite the fact that the data in this study was all collected in England.

## **Chinese students' perceptions of humour in English academic lectures**

Humour is widely-acknowledged to be deeply embedded in cultural context<sup>2</sup> (Apte, 1985). This leads us to predict that it may cause problems in intercultural communication. From the pedagogical perspective, miscommunication in intercultural teaching and learning has long drawn the attention of social researchers (den Brok and Levy, 2005; den Brok et al., 2002; Hofstede, 1986; Levy et al., 1997; Ting-Toomey, 1999); Hofstede (1986: 301) points out that when 'teacher and student come from different cultures, such as in the context of economic development programmes, many perplexities can arise'. Humour inevitably contributes to these perplexities. Several scholars, as shown below, have pointed out humour-related issues in intercultural academic contexts.

Based on their research project in a Hong Kong university, Flowerdew and Miller (1996) noticed discrepancies in the perceptions of humour between students and lecturers together with the subsequent problems this caused:

It needs to be accepted by lecturers and students that there is likely to be cross-cultural misunderstanding as far as humour is concerned and that, as a result, lecturers, on the one hand, may be perceived by their students as lacking in human warmth, and students, on the other hand, may be perceived by their lecturers as unresponsive. Students, who may not be accustomed to their teachers being humorous, need to be made aware that lecturers are likely to use humour as an integral part of their lecturing style and that a lot of it may be above their heads.

(ibid.: 137)

Another example is Davies (2003) who deals with intercultural conversations recorded in an American university. Her research results 'highlight the apparently arbitrary nature of

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of 'culture' is highly problematic. I will return to the discussion of it in §3.4.4.

idiomatic expressions, the difficulty of coping with interaction in the new language, and the general powerlessness of the language learner in a world of native speakers' (ibid.: 1361). A final example is Bell (2002, 2005, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2009b), who is interested in how non-native students cope with humour in English, and collects data through tape recordings made by her participants of their daily conversations. Interestingly, Bell's (2002, 2005) study shows that, despite her subjects' limited abilities with respect to humour in a second language, misunderstandings based on humour are rare and do not appear to cause interactional difficulties. This may be to do with the fact that conversationalists can interact to make sense of each other, which echoes my personal experience introduced in §1.1.1. In an asymmetric communication such as lectures, students have far fewer resources to avoid misunderstandings.

Again, none of the above three studies concerning humour in intercultural education was conducted in England, a country which is one of the most popular destinations of international students. The number of international students studying in English universities has increased in recent years (the number of Non-EU domiciled students increased by 4.9% from 236,900 to 248,455 between years 2009/10 and 2010/11 (HESA, 2012)). These students are inevitably faced with culture shock, and more discouraging is the fact that many of them are postgraduates who only have a single year in the country (54% of the total number of non-EU domiciled students in the UK in 2010/11 were postgraduates (HESA, 2012)). China produces more international students than any other country. Of all the non-EU domiciled students in England in 2010/11, almost a quarter were from China (HESA, 2012). Many British academic institutes have investigated and reported the difficulties Chinese students have in their daily and academic life (Chan and Drover, 1997; Cortazzi and Jin, 1997; Edwards and An, 2006; Edwards et al., 2007; Spencer-Oatey and

Xiong, 2006). In these investigations, academic issues, such as understanding lectures, adapting study skills and student-teacher relationships, were constantly raised as the biggest problems experienced by the Chinese respondents. Another repeatedly reported issue regarding Chinese students in Britain is that they experience much less intercultural interaction with native speakers than they expect (Edwards and An, 2006; Gu, 2009; Robson and Turner, 2007; Spencer-Oatey and Xiong, 2006; Tian and Lowe, 2009).

However, humour in English was only mentioned in passing in two of the investigations. In Tian and Lowe (*ibid.*), one Chinese student described his/her experience of not understanding humour in lectures and feeling alienated by this:

In lectures, British students always told some jokes that we couldn't understand. At that time I felt as if I was watching TV. They were playing and I was watching.

(*ibid.*:665)

Another investigation of Chinese students that touches on humour is Spencer-Oatey and Xiong (2006), where the Chinese respondents were asked to rate the level of difficulty and importance of pre-set items of cultural adjustment. The respondents rated 'understanding jokes and humour in English' as the most difficult item, although this was not considered to be important compared to academic issues. One possible reason might be that these respondents were on a one-year course in Britain, so although they had recognised the difficulty of humour in English, the pressure of study spared them no time to consider or improve the situation; it could also be that the respondents did not notice much humour in their life in Britain, which could be a result of the infrequent occurrence of humour in reality or the respondents' inability to notice it. However, there are no other studies which contribute to the exploration of Chinese students' perceptions of humour in British academic contexts. Without such knowledge, it is hard to assess how such humour

influences their life and study overseas. My research will therefore fill this gap by exploring Chinese students' experience of humour in British academic lectures.

## **Classroom discourse**

Academic lectures, as a type of spoken classroom discourse, are drawing more and more scholarly attention. A small number of such studies carried out in the last decade focus on the difficulties English language learners have in understanding university lectures in English-speaking countries (cf. Flowerdew, 1994; Lynch, 2010). The emergence of academic corpora and associated computational technologies have enabled the analysis of large bodies of data recorded in real classrooms, which contain not only lectures but more interactive contexts like study groups and lab sessions. Areas of investigation have included the occurrence of particular lexical items, grammatical features, discourse markers, and linguistic variations (more detailed introductions to studies of this topic are included in Csomay (2005, 2007)).

Some of the research findings on classroom discourse are informative for my research purposes. An example is Csomay (2000, 2006). In her attempt to provide a broad linguistic description of university classroom discourse, Csomay (ibid.) claims that university classroom talk is a mixed register both in terms of its situational and linguistic characteristics.

University classroom talk can be considered at the interface of an oral-literate continuum where 'oral' refers to prototypical speaking such as conversation, and 'literate' refers to stereotypical writing as in academic prose (Biber, 1988, 1995).

Csomay (2006: 119)

Applying the multidimensional framework developed in Biber (1988, 1995), Csomay's

statistics using corpus software seem to support her claim. This leads me to suggest that humour in academic lectures encompasses the planned and performative features of written humour and narrative/canned jokes on the one hand, and is also a type of co-constructed and spontaneous conversational humour on the other; by studying the linguistic features of humour in academic lectures, we may gain insight into how these features affect students' understanding. Since such studies have not been pursued by scholars in the fields of humour research or academic discourse, there is much to be gained from an investigation of the linguistic forms and interactional functions of humour in university lectures.

I have focused so far on the initial interest of this study, which was derived from my experience of being unable to understand why other people were laughing in academic lectures. Such experience had an alienating effect on me. I then proposed that the incomprehension was humour-related, and raised some questions for an initial enquiry. In §1.1.2, I referred to data from the BASE corpus to illustrate humour in academic lectures. The large number of humour instances noticed in BASE indicated the prevalence of humour in British academic lectures. §1.1.3 foregrounded three areas of research which were directly relevant to the current study, and identified gaps for further exploration. Although some instances of humour in my study have been shown in §1.1.2, I have not yet provided a definition of humour. Below, I will introduce a working definition of humour as the starting point for my argument in the remainder of this thesis.

## **1.2 Humour: a working definition**

Defining humour is notoriously difficult. Attardo (1994:1-13) assesses various historical attempts to define humour and questions the possibility of an a priori definition. The study of conversational humour is relatively new, and technology has only allowed compilation

of large spoken corpora in the last decade (cf. Adolphs and Carter, 2007), so there is much to explore for this subject from both theoretical and empirical perspectives. In her study of gender and humour in conversations, Hay (1995:5) noticed the contradictions and inconsistencies between the existing definitions of humour in spoken contexts. She concluded that researchers should carefully clarify their terms so that comparisons and agreements can be achieved. In her study of workplace discourse, Holmes (2000) puts forward a definition which addresses the role of the analyst:

Incidences of humour included in this analysis are utterances which are identified by the analyst, on the basis of paralinguistic, prosodic and discoursal clues, as intended by the speaker(s) to be amusing and perceived to be amusing by at least some participants.

(ibid. :163)

Both Hay and Holmes adopt an inductive approach to defining humour: instead of developing *a priori* definitions, they set up rules for identifying referents of humour in their database. Such rules should enable comparisons, conciliations and potentially standardisation in the long run. I decided to follow this approach to start the investigation of humour in this study, and to emphasise my role as analyst in identifying and interpreting humour. Holmes' definition of humour as shown above will be regarded as an initial working definition in my study. I will refine this definition at the end of Chapter 4 based on my review and analysis of the large amount of data in BASE. In the last chapter of the thesis, I will then reflect further on the nature of humour in my study.

### **1.3 Research questions**

My study aims to investigate the incidence of humour in British academic lectures and Chinese students' perceptions of this. I have identified a working definition of humour in the prior section. The hypothesis of my study is that Chinese students in England have



difficulty with and are even frequently unaware of humour in lectures. As the first study of this kind in England, it is important to investigate, firstly, what humour is like in English academic lectures. As I explained in §1.1.2, the BASE corpus provided a valuable resource to identify and scrutinise instances of humour in this context. Therefore I propose the following research question:

- What are the formal and functional properties of humour in the BASE lectures?

My discussion in Chapter 3 will explain that, as an existing data set not developed for the purpose of the current study, BASE has some shortcomings. So I recorded and developed a small corpus of humour instances in nine university lectures in England. My contextual knowledge of these lectures and access to the students' and lecturers' accounts of identified humour instances allowed me to better scrutinise their functions as compared to the humour instances identified in the BASE lectures. So my study of the Small Corpus data was focused on functions of humour, and my research question in relation to this corpus is:

- Building on the study of the BASE data, what are the functions of humour in the Small Corpus?

Alongside my study of the formal and functional properties of humour in British academic lectures, I wanted to understand how Chinese students in the lectures which I recorded actually perceived such humour, and also how their lecturers used such humour. Questions that relate to this interest are:

- How do the Chinese students in this study perceive humour in the lectures?
- How do the lecturers in this study account for their use of humour in the lectures?

Finally in reflecting on my study, I also addressed the following question:

- What are the implications of this study for Chinese students' understanding of humour in British academic lectures and for their overseas experience?

## 1.4 Outline of the thesis

In Chapter 2, I review the literature on humour, and theories and frameworks, that have informed the study. This chapter is divided into three parts. In the first part I provide an overview of explanations of the nature and source of humour. The second part of the chapter reviews literature on humour which is more directly relevant to the current study. The third part of the chapter is devoted to the major theories and frameworks that have been widely employed in humour studies, and are directly adopted in the analysis of humour in my data.

In Chapter 3, I elaborate on the methods employed in the study and their rationale. In the first two sections of this chapter, I explain the two stages of the research process. In the last section, I first discuss the triangulation of methods and data in the study. I then consider some overarching conceptual and methodological issues of my research design.

Chapter 4 studies the large amount of data in the BASE corpus. In the first part of the chapter, I provide a quantitative review of laughter tags in BASE. The second part explain and recapitulate how instances of humour were identified in BASE. In the final part, I introduce the analytical framework developed based on the review of 322 laughter tags in BASE.

Chapter 5 explores how humour functions in the nine lectures I recorded in two university departments in England. It begins with a brief review of potential macro patterns of humour in the lectures, and then moves on to the analysis of its functions. The analysis also

draws on the lecturers' accounts of their use of humour.

Chapter 6 presents findings derived from playback and discussion sessions with 39 Chinese students who had attended the nine lectures I recorded. During these sessions, audio recordings of some instances of humour in the lectures were played to the participants, and their accounts of humour in these instances were collected through written responses, interviews, and group discussions.

In the last chapter of the thesis, I firstly summarise the main findings of the study through addressing the research questions raised in §1.3. I Then discuss some implications of the study.



## **2. Humour studies and informative theories**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter is divided into three parts. In the first part, ‘defining humour’, I first provide an overview of some explanations of the nature and source of humour. General theories of humour will be reviewed and assessed. Major attention is paid to theories from philosophy, psychology, psychoanalysis and evolution as humour has been most studied in these domains. All of these general theories emerged in the Western world. As this thesis investigates Chinese students’ perceptions of humour, I then present a review of the history of humour as a concept in China, the representations of humour in Chinese arts, literature and the Internet, and the orthodox and public attitudes to humour.

The second part of the chapter ‘framing the study’ reviews literature on humour which is more directly relevant to the current study. The focus is first narrowed down to linguistic studies of humour, followed by a discussion of how the current study is positioned in the theoretically separate domains of semantics and pragmatics. In §2.3.3, various attempts at categorising conversational humour are reviewed. In the last section, I review a substantial body of empirical studies of humour in language teaching and in classrooms in general.

The third part of the chapter is devoted to some major theories and frameworks that have been widely employed in humour studies, and that will be directly adopted in the analysis of humour in my data. These theories and frameworks underlie the data analysis in Chapters 4 and 5. Other conceptions and terms, which inform only parts of the data analysis, will be explained as they emerge from the analysis.

## 2.2 Defining humour

### 2.2.1. General theories of humour

The study of humour, through its long history, has been explored by some major names in western culture including Aristotle, Cicero, Freud, Bergson and Pirandello. It is an interdisciplinary field encompassing philosophy, psychology, psychoanalysis, evolutionary theories and anthropology. Among the diverse approaches to this subject, there are four highly influential traditions: release theories, superiority theories, evolutionary theories and incongruity theories (cf. Attardo, 2008a; Cook, 2000:71-78; Günther, 2003:6-12; Polimeni and Reiss, 2006:349-351). Each of these traditions depicts a different and usually partial aspect of humour, so they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In the following sections, I will briefly discuss them in turn.

#### Release theories

The best-known works of this tradition are Freud (1960 [1905]) and (1928)<sup>3</sup>. The former describes jokes (*Witze*) as a psychological mechanism to release psychic tension pertaining to the inhibition of unconscious sexual or aggressive impulses; the latter argues that humour is used in stressful and aversive situations to release painful emotion. Although these two claims may be well exemplified, respectively, by jokes about sexuality and self-directed teasing in awkward situations, they ignore semantic and interpersonal dimensions of humour. Thus these theories provide relatively a narrow insight into humour (cf. Günther, 2003:7-9; Martin, 2007:33-35). Release theories have also been questioned in

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<sup>3</sup> More recent development of this theory includes Fry (1963), Fry and Allen (1976), Latta (1999), Mindess (1971), and Ziv and Gadish (1990).

empirical research on individuals' preferences for jokes. One well-acknowledged hypothesis deduced from the Freudian theories asserts that individuals who repress their sexuality derive more pleasure from jokes relating to this topic (cf. Kline, 1977). However, some experiments (Goldstein et al., 1972; Ruch and Hehl, 1987, 1988) show a result which contrasts sharply with this hypothesis: individuals who are open or positive towards sexuality appreciate sexual jokes more. One explanation of the variance may be that these experiments are concerned with only one aspect of jokes, i.e. their contents, hence fail to take into account their structures, which are an important variable of humour as I will discuss below in relation to incongruity theories.

### **Superiority theories**

Superiority theories explain humour as the product of a sense of superiority arising from disparagement of other people or of one's own past blunders. Compared with release theories, this tradition also relates humour to aggression, and it addresses humour's interpersonal dimension, that is, the relation between the disparaging and disparaged. It is thought to be the oldest tradition in the study of humour which can be dated back to Plato and Aristotle (Martin, 2007:44). It was expressed as follows by Thomas Hobbes:

[T]he passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly [...]

(Hobbes, 2005[1840]:46)

Other works containing strong focuses on superiority theories of humour include Bergson (1911), Leacock (1935) and Ludovici (1932). One of the current and most outspoken advocates of this tradition is Gruner (1978, 1997), who sees humour as a form of game or competition, which always involves a winner and a loser. Many experimental results

provide evidence of the aggressive aspect of humour by showing that individuals gain more mirth from humour disparaging those whom they resent (McGhee and Duffey, 1983; McGhee and Lloyd, 1981; Zillmann and Cantor, 1976). However, like Freud (1960 [1905]), Gruner restricts his analyses to jokes. Besides, the emphasis on aggression by both Gruner (1978, 1997) and, much earlier, Hobbes tends to exaggerate and distort the negative aspects of humour, and, as a result, is rejected by most researchers today (Martin, 2007:55). A more plausible way of relating humour to games may be that of Cook (2000:63-64), in which the author elaborates the concept of language play, and compares it to ball games as they involve both competition and collaboration.

### **Evolutionary theories**

Evolutionary psychologists are interested in the development of humour in natural and sexual selection, looking at its origin, evolutionary advantages and adaptive history<sup>4</sup>. This tradition is compatible with the superiority theory in many senses, with Gruner (1978) as a good example: Gruner (ibid.:43) speculates that laughter primitively served as a ‘roar of triumph’ by the winner of a battle to dispel excessive tension and signal victory; after the emergence of language, combats became not only physical but verbal as hominids ridiculed weaker members; such ridicule gradually evolved into humour. Alexander (1986) also analyses the pursuit of superiority originating from humour within the evolutionary context, and claims that hominids with a good sense of humour achieved more reproductive success.

Laughter is the main subject of evolutionary theories of humour. Darwin (1872) makes a

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<sup>4</sup> For detailed summaries and reviews of evolutionary-related theories of humour, see Polimeni and Reiss (2006) and Gervais and Wilson (2005).



comprehensive and precise typology of the physical realisation of humour, laughter, taking account of respiration, vocalisation, facial action and gestures (see discussion in Ruch (2008:24)). Ramachandran (1998) describes laughter being used by hominids to signal a 'false alarm' on the occasion of 'anomaly that entails a change' (ibid.:351). Jung (2003) asserts that 'laughter is a signal that facilitates cooperation by transfer of information on the laugher's empathy with attributed mental states and his sympathy levels for others' (ibid.:245).

However, the universalist claims of evolutionary psychology are under constant criticism; it is accused of offering 'false unification' and a 'reductionist account in which presumed biological explanations imperialise and attempt to replace all others' (Rose, 2000:247).

Although the above theories address the origin, importance and prevalence of humour, they provide no accounts of its cultural and temporal variations. To address this issue, I would argue that Cook's (2000) proposal to account for play in terms both of biological and cultural factors is also applicable to the study of humour.

### **Incongruity theories**

[If] there is one generalisation that can be extracted from the literature about humour, it is that humour involves incongruity.

(Ritchie, 2004:46)

Theories under this tradition argue that the perception of incongruity, such as peculiarity and abnormality, is an essential element of all humour. Compared to the traditions discussed above, these theories focus more on cognition and give less attention to social and emotional aspects of humour. Such ideas were first discussed by Aristotle, and later rediscovered by several renowned scholars including Schopenhauer (1969 [1818]), Kant (1951) and Koestler (1964). Koestler developed the concept of 'bisociation' to describe the

juxtaposition of two normally incompatible or disparate frames of reference; these two frames were perceived simultaneously in one object, e.g. puns.

In contemporary studies, it is agreed that incongruity is a necessary but insufficient condition of humour (Martin, 2007:64; Ruch, 2008:25). Koestler (1964) himself suggests that aggression is another necessary condition. Suls (1972) states that humour arises from the resolution of an incongruity, for which he proposes a two-stage model of the incongruity-resolution (IR) theory. This can be illustrated with the following joke:

An English bishop received the following note from the vicar of a village in his diocese:  
“Milord, I regret to inform you of my wife’s death. Can you possibly send me a substitute for the weekend?”

(Raskin, 1985:106)

In the first stage, upon knowing the death of the vicar’s wife at the beginning of the joke, the reader may predict that he is seeking the sympathy of the bishop; but the last sentence in the vicar’s note, in which he seems to be requesting a replacement of his wife, sounds incongruous. In the second stage, the reader tries to solve this puzzlement by going back over the joke to search for reconciliation; by doing so, the reader realises that the vicar is actually asking for another clergyman to replace him. Hereupon, the incongruity is resolved and the reader is amused.

Although some experiments with children (Shultz, 1972; Shultz and Horibe, 1974), in which the resolution is manipulated, seem to support the IR theory, many other scholars have questioned it. Goldstein and McGhee (1972) and Ruch (2001) consider that this theory describes the comprehension but not appreciation of humour, and Ruch (2008) further suggests a third stage when the reader detects the comical nature of the incongruity. Ritchie (2004) and Martin (2007:72-73) question IR’s capability to inform understanding

of non-joke humour. Some others argue that the role of resolution is over-stated in IR considering that incongruity in humour is never fully resolved (Martin, 2007:66). Two scholars, Nerhardt (1976) and Decker (1993), argue on the basis of experimental evidence that incongruity without resolution is capable of eliciting humour. Other scholars stress the level and structure of incongruity, and attempt to classify it into various types (cf. Attardo et al., 2002; Partington, 2006:43-56; Raskin, 1985).

Among the major traditions of humour, incongruity theories are the only ones which stress the structure of humour. This has been followed by most linguistic humour researchers (Attardo, 2008a:104), and is addressed further in this thesis in §2.4.3.

### **2.2.2. Humour in Chinese culture**

My study is focused on Chinese students in the England. To gain some ideas of how my research subjects experience humour in their home country, and provide possible contrastive evidence from non-Western humour studies, I will present in this section a general introduction to humour in Chinese culture.

In the Chinese language, ‘youmo’, or ‘幽默’, is widely acknowledged as the equivalent of ‘humour’ in English (Liao, 1998, 2003; Qian, 2007; Yue, 2010). It is commonly used in Chinese daily discourse. In fact, ‘youmo’ is a transliteration of ‘humour’, and was first introduced by the famous scholar and writer Lin Yutang (1895-1976) in the 1920s to refer to what he believed to be an attitude common in Western culture, but lacking in contemporary Chinese highbrow literature and academic discourse (Lin, 1924a, 1924b). This attitude, according to Lin, was to relax and take things light-heartedly (e.g., a funeral could be treated as pleasantly as a wedding) (Lin, 1936), and he regarded some Western writers including George Bernard Shaw and Mark Twain as the masters of humour (Lin,

1995). Lin's promotion of *youmo* caused heated debates in China in the 1920s to 30s, and the term has since become widely used. However, it should be noted that, as Lin pointed out himself repeatedly, his introduction of *youmo* to the Chinese language did not mean that Chinese people were not humorous, nor did it mean that humour had not existed in Chinese culture. He listed a series of words in the Chinese language which, to various extents, were relatives of humour (Lin, 1995:210).

In fact, in the long history of the Chinese civilisation, various types of performance and literature with the purpose of amusing people have emerged. The earliest comedians in China, as recorded in Sima Qian's (司马迁 145-80 B.C.) Record of History (*Shi Ji* 史记), were some *paiyous* (俳优), who told jokes, danced, and played verbal tricks to aristocrats at around 800 B.C. (Q. Wang, 2007; Yue, 2010). They were famous for being eloquent, and often alluded to politics in their performances and conversations with the emperors (Q. Wang, 2007:5). These *paiyous*' eloquent, witty and amusing way of speaking were often described as *huaji* (滑稽), which is considered by some scholars to be the closest equivalent to 'humour' before Lin proposed '*youmo*' (Chen, 2003; Kao, 1974; Liao, 2003). Another type of humorous performance, Crosstalk (*Xiangsheng* 相声), is said to have become an independent art form since the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century (Hu, 2009; Xue, 1985), and is still popular in China today. In many ways this resembles British stand-up comedy. Apart from performing arts, in literature and philosophy, Confucius (551-479 B.C.) is said to be a humorous person (Lin, 1995; Yue, 2010); Taoism, founded by Laozi (604 B.C.-?) and Zhuangzi (369-286 B.C.), is regarded to be full of humorous ideas and argumentation (Kao, 1974; Lin, 1995; Yue, 2010). In addition, satire plays an important role in Chinese literature (T. X. Wang, 2007). In modern Chinese society, humour is ubiquitous. Humorous uses of language, exemplified in word play such as homophones, are common on the

Internet, and have attracted domestic academic interest (Ding, 2010; Du, 2010; Ma, 2010; Wong, 2007). For example, the Chinese word for *river crabs* is a homophone of *harmony*, and is commonly used to refer to the latter in blogs and on-line communities.

My introduction above to humour in Chinese literature and art performances is necessarily brief and partial due to limitations of space. A more comprehensive review of this topic can be found in Yue (2010). However, despite its long existence in China, humour was not appreciated by the school of Neo-Confucianism - the orthodox philosophy in China since Song Dynasty (960-1279) (Liao, 2001; Nevo et al., 2001; Yue, 2010; Yue, 2011). Lin Yutang believed that the Neo-Confucian doctrines of serious moralism, which he called Confucian Puritanism, had impeded the thriving of humour in Chinese literature, and it was against this tradition that he advocated *youmo* (Qian, 2007). Yue (2010) further points out that Confucian puritanical principles and doctrines were prejudiced against humour and laughter. Also, he argues that humour was restricted during the Chinese communist movement in the 1940s and the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). However, there are only a handful of empirical investigations of how Chinese (Mainland) people view humour (see the next paragraph), although it is constantly talked about in popular literature and in academia - a long list of journal articles turned up after I searched for *youmo* in the Chinese academic database cnki.net. However, a majority of these articles are based on observations, anecdotes and speculations. In addition, there seems to be growing interest in humour in teaching, especially English language teaching (Chen, 2007; Jiang, 2010; Sun, 2010; Yin, 2011; Zhang, 2010). These authors all express positive opinions of using humour in the classroom, but their evidence is also anecdotal and speculative.

Several empirical studies of humour in China have been conducted by Chen Guo Hai (Chen, in press; Chen and Martin, 2007) and Yue Xiao Dong (Yue, 2011; Yue et al., 2010).

Yue et al. (2010) invited 159 undergraduates in Hong Kong (southern China) and 178 undergraduates in Huhehot (northern China) to complete a questionnaire designed to investigate their views of humour. All the participants thought that humour was highly important in everyday life, but most of them did not consider themselves to be humorous. The participants also rated 60 adjectives describing personality according to their importance to humour and so-called Chinese personality respectively. The results of both cohorts showed that what the participants considered to be important qualities of being humorous were very different from those of being Chinese; to an extent, the two concepts appeared to be incompatible. In Chen and Martin (2007), 7,560 students in one university in southern China rated their teachers' use of humour in the classroom and their effectiveness in teaching, and the results showed positive correlations between the two. Yue et al.'s (2010) and Chen and Martin's (2007) studies are limited by a lack of description of 'humour'. In addition, their participants were all university students from three Chinese cities, and thus may not adequately represent Chinese people in general. But the results of their studies suggest that humour is appreciated by their participants, who to a certain extent represent ordinary Chinese people, in everyday life and the classroom. This is in contrast to the historically negative attitude to humour in Chinese orthodox literature and philosophy as discussed in the prior paragraph. Yue (2011) makes the point that there is 'Chinese ambivalence toward humour' (ibid.:463), referring to, together with other aspects, the contrasting attitude to humour held by ordinary Chinese people and by people in authority who strongly influence Chinese orthodox literature and philosophy.

Various scholars have claimed that so-called Chinese/Oriental humour is different from Western humour (Kao, 1974; Liao, 1998; Lin, 1995; Waters, 1998). However, they provide only anecdotal and speculative evidences. Some quantitative evidence can be found in

Chen and Martin (2007), in which the same questionnaires were completed separately by 354 university students in southern China and 388 university students in Canada. The Canadian cohort reported using more humour, especially ‘aggressive humour’ (such as sarcasm and teasing) compared to the Chinese cohort. Chen (in press), following Ruch (1998), believed that there were two types of humour. According to Chen’s description, one of these types is ‘benevolent and restricted to positive meanings’, and is a narrow sense of humour; the other type sees humour to be anything that evokes positive feelings and amusement, and thus deploys a broad sense of humour. He conducted interviews with 16 Chinese and five Anglo-Canadian participants on how they defined humour, based on which he concluded that the former defined humour in the narrow sense, and the latter in the broad sense. However, he failed to present any data or analysis to support this conclusion. As such, claims of a distinction between Chinese/Oriental and Western humour lack empirical foundation, especially qualitative evidence.

## **2.3 Framing the study**

In the above sections, I have produced brief accounts of the general theories of humour in the Western world, and the concept and history of and attitudes towards humour in Chinese culture. In this second part of the chapter, I will review literature on humour which is more directly relevant to the current study as an investigation of humour in discourse. The focus will be firstly narrowed down to linguistic studies of humour, followed by a discussion of how the current study is positioned in relation to the theoretically distinct domains of semantics and pragmatics. In §2.3.3, various attempts at categorising conversational humour will be reviewed. In the last section, I will review a substantial body of empirical studies of humour in language teaching and in the classroom.

### 2.3.1. Linguistic studies of humour

Linguistic approaches did not occupy a notable position in humour studies until the 1980s (Attardo, 2005). One milestone was the advent of the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) developed by Attardo and Raskin (1991; 1994), which is still the most comprehensive and dominant theory in the contemporary linguistic studies of humour. It is rooted in incongruity theories (§2.2.1) and proposes that humour is the effect of incongruous ‘scripts’, the cognitive schemata triggered by lexical items. I will explain this theory further in §2.4.3. Following GTVH, several attempts, such as Attardo (1997, 2001), Curcó (1997, 1998) and Yus (2003), have been made to establish a universal framework for analysing jokes in literature and what are termed narrative/canned jokes<sup>5</sup> in conversation. Meanwhile, more and more researchers have become interested in studying conversational humour especially its interactional functions in daily communication. One important strand of such study is based on or informed by Conversation Analysis (CA) (Clift, 1999; Drew, 1987; Glenn, 2003; Günther, 2003; Haakana, 2001, 2002; Haakana and Sorjonen, 2011; Jefferson, 1979, 1984; Jefferson et al., 1987; Norrick, 1993). These studies focus on laughter in conversation, and demonstrate that, as well as being a reaction to humour, laughter serves many socialising functions. Another salient strand features the use of large corpora consisting of recordings of spontaneous conversations, which includes the New Zealand-based Language in the Workplace Project (LWP) led by Janet Holmes (Holmes, 2000, 2006b, 2007; Holmes and Marra, 2002a, 2002b; Holmes and Stubbe, 2003). These works depict how humour can positively contribute to relational and working activities in

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<sup>5</sup> Attardo (2001:61-62), in discussing spoken jokes, distinguishes between narrative/canned and conversational jokes. The former refers to those rehearsed and told by narrators while the latter are improvised by speakers in conversation. However, he immediately admits the fuzziness of this distinction since jokes are always recycled and adapted to different contexts. Some other scholars make similar distinctions such as Boxer and Cortés-Conde (1997) and Norrick (2003).



the workplace. The LWP has also given rise to a series of investigations into gender in humour (Hay, 1995, 2000, 2001; Holmes, 2006b; Schnurr and Holmes, 2009; Vine et al., 2009). These studies show that humour is an important resource for colleagues to do gender at workplace. Two recent books also draw on data from large corpora: one is by Partington (2006) looking at 'laughter-talk' in American press briefings, and the other comes from Chafe (2007) who studies what he believes to be the essence of humour - the feeling of nonseriousness - by scrutinising data from the Corpus of Spoken American English. Such research on conversational humour stresses the fact that much humour is co-constructed, and has been influenced only to a limited extent by the study of written and narrative/canned jokes.

Besides the above studies which explicitly classify themselves as humour research, the recent surge of interest in everyday language creativity and language play (Carter, 1999, 2004; Carter and McCarthy, 2004; Cook, 1997, 2000; Crystal, 1998; Maybin and Swann, 2006; Tannen, 1989[2007]) exemplified by Maybin and Swann's (2007c) edited collection also contains a strong focus on humour. These studies are interested in the ubiquity of creativity and artfulness in everyday language use, and 'problematis[e] the distinction between the "literary" and the "everyday"' (Maybin and Swann, 2007b:491). Although humour has been researched in various contexts, and its application in language learning has been advocated by numerous scholars, e.g. Attardo (2008a), Bell (2005), Cook (2000), Deneire (1995), Forman (2011), Medgyes (2002), Neuliep (1991), Pomerantz and Bell (2007), Schmitz (2002), Ziv (1988), and Ziyaeermehr et al. (2011), humour in academic contexts has attracted modest attention in the field of linguistics. Studies in the field so far include Pomerantz and Bell (2007), Davies (2003) Kozlova (2008), Lee (2006), Nelms

(2001), and Nesi (2012)<sup>6</sup>. These studies suggest that humour in academic contexts is prevalent and serves a variety of functions. Pomerantz and Bell's (2007) study has a focus on language learning at university level, and demonstrates through transcript analysis that language learners' play with the language being learned contributes to expand their 'overall communicative repertoires' (ibid.:556).

### **2.3.2. Semantics and pragmatics of humour**

Humour has long been studied as a semantic subject. For example, Raskin's (1985) Semantic Theory of Humour (SSTH) argues that jokes involve a semantic opposition between the scripts (further details included in §2.4.3). However, in most cases, humour can be seen as arising from incompatible semantic and pragmatic meanings. For example, the semantic meaning of 'Mary is a good singer' is obvious, but for someone who knows Mary and the fact that she is actually an awful singer, this comment may sound ironic. More and more scholars have started to stress pragmatics in linguistic studies of humour and related subjects (Attardo, 2003, 2005, 2008b; Hay, 2001; Widdowson, 2008; Yus, 2003). Attardo (2003) maintains that 'all humour involves a semantic-pragmatic process', and re-interprets SSTH to include a violation of Grice's cooperative principle (ibid.:1287) (further details see §2.4.1). Moreover, linguistic research into conversational humour such as Janet Holmes' and Jennifer Hay's are essentially pragmatic studies. My study entails this focus on pragmatics of humour, and I employ pragmatic theories and framework in my analysis.

Nevertheless, the boundary and relationship between semantics and pragmatics is highly

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<sup>6</sup> Nesi's paper on laughter in academic lectures also draws data from relatively large language corpora including BASE, Michigan corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE), and Engineering Lecture Corpus (ELC).

complex and under on-going debates by scholars representing different camps (Koyama, 2006). At the macro level, what is included in the domain of pragmatics is constantly being shaped and reshaped (Horn and Ward, 2004). Humour itself is a subject with fuzzy boundaries, and its content cannot be easily demarcated and mapped onto the equally fuzzy semantics-pragmatics division. This may explain why humour is usually not discussed as a discrete subject in pragmatics although it is often referred to, e.g. humour as an indirect politeness strategy in Brown and Levinson (1987) as discussed in §2.4.2, and the irony principle in Leech (1983)<sup>7</sup>. At the micro level of individual utterances, the definitions of and relationship between semantic and pragmatic meanings are also constantly debated (Bezuidenhout, 2006). In this thesis, I do not go into the details of such debates, but will apply these terms to make a rough distinction between what is said (semantic meanings) and what is meant (pragmatic meanings).

### **2.3.3. Categories of humour**

The complex nature of humour as discussed in §2.2.1 indicates the immense challenge of its classification. Numerous studies have attempted to categorise types of humour, but well-accepted categories have yet to be identified. Classification of forms of humour is often carried out with data in written texts. Reviews of these attempts can be found in Attardo (1997) and Nash (1985). The most discussed formal types of humour include jokes (Chiaro, 1992; Davies, 1982, 1990; Ritchie, 2004; Suls, 1972) and puns/word play (a summary of literature on puns is included in Attardo (2008a:106); literature on word play include Bell et al. (2011) Partington (2009), Sacks (1973), Sherzer (1978, 1993), and Sobkowiak (1991)). However, the compatibility of such categories with conversational

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<sup>7</sup> One exception is Handbook of Pragmatics Online (Verschuere and Östman, 2008), which devotes a separate chapter to humour.

humour is doubtful as they are derived from written texts. My discussion below will be focused on the classification of conversational humour.

For the purpose of gaining theoretical orientation, Norrick (2003) structurally distinguishes several relatively clear types of conversational humour: jokes, anecdotes/narrative jokes, punning/word play and irony, but points out that a clear distinction between them is 'neither possible nor sensible' because they fall into points along a continuum (ibid.:1338). Norrick, following Attardo and Raskin (Attardo, 1994; Attardo and Raskin, 1991; Raskin, 1985; Raskin and Attardo, 1994), sees jokes as texts which entail two opposing interpretations (see §2.4.3 for Attardo and Raskin's theory). In addition, echoing Chiaro's (1992) idea, a joke always ends in a punchline, and the punchline suppresses one interpretation (the salient one) by giving rise to the other (the less salient one). Norrick (ibid.: 1335) gives the example of a joke below:

A bum came up to me this morning and said he hadn't had a bite in weeks, so I bit him.

In this example, as the punchline 'so I bit him' appears, the salient meaning of having a bite, i.e. having food, is suppressed and replaced by the less salient meaning, i.e. being bitten. Norrick describes personal anecdotes as reports of funny events that happened to the teller; they are usually prefaced by statements like 'the funniest thing happened to me' or 'I remember when I was five or six' (ibid.:1339). Narrative jokes are similar to personal anecdotes except that they are not about a real or even realistic person. Norrick contrasts punning with jokes and anecdotes as the latter are 'explicitly set off' from the on-going conversation, but the former is 'announced and disruptive of topical conversation' (ibid.:1339). He gives an example of a group of friends having a conversation about a painting of a yawl in a channel. One of the conversationalists disrupts the talk by saying 'y'all in the channel (laugh)' (ibid.:1340). As for irony, Norrick thinks that it also entails

two opposing interpretations like jokes, but the two interpretations always co-exist in the text. His example of irony is that one man mentions watching a film recently, and his brother replies: 'boy I'll bet that's a great movie'. Here, different interpretations regarding whether the speaker believes the movie is great remain valid throughout the utterance.

Norrick's distinction between the four types of conversational humour above, i.e. jokes, anecdotes/narrative jokes, punning/word play and irony, considers mainly the textual features and the relation between multiple interpretations. It has informed my analysis of humour in lectures. However, as Norrick admits, the categorisation is not exhaustive. My data analysis in Chapter 4 shows that many instances of humour in lectures, especially face-act humour, cannot be classified into any of the four categories, e.g. in the extract below from BASE, Lls10 is introducing himself and his colleagues to the students:

- 1 Lls10: the first thing I want to talk about, is the staff, who are going to be running this  
2 particular class, # you know me I'm <name>, my colleagues, over there, #  
3 there's <name> who will put his hand up, <name>, <name> #,  
4 <laughing voice> sorry </> <name> she's recently changed her name which always  
5 confused me Adam<sup>8</sup>, Adam he has a nickname  
6 SS: <laughter>  
7 Lls10: which I'm going not going to release to you, you may find out later

(lslct010)

This extract is neither an anecdote nor a joke, and involves no word play. In addition, it does not bear opposing interpretations. The lecturer mentions that another lecturer, Adam, has a nickname, which triggers laughter. This utterance occurs fleetingly, and its textual structure is difficult to define. However, as I will explain in Chapter 4, Lls10 teases his

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<sup>8</sup> All names appearing in the transcripts in this thesis are pseudonyms.

colleague Adam by referring to his nickname, and bonds with the students through sharing the laughter. This interpersonal act is an instance of humour. Norrick (1993, 2003) also emphasises the interpersonal aspect of what he calls ‘conversational joking’, i.e.

spontaneous conversational humour, but all his examples and analysis involve one or some of the four types of conversational humour classified based on textual features and juxtaposition between meanings. Humour that is predominantly interpersonal, as exemplified by the nickname example above, is common in BASE (more examples in §4.3.3). In fact, punning/word play, which is significant in Norrick’s discussion, occurs very infrequently in BASE (see §4.3.1). So categorisation of conversational humour needs to have greater focus on its functions, especially interpersonal functions.

Many studies of conversational humour such as Graham et al. (1992), Günther (2003), Hay (2002b), Holmes and Marra (2002b), and Nesi (2012) develop categories conflating formal and functional features of humour. For example, Hay’s (1995:65) taxonomy includes 12 items:

- anecdotes
- fantasy
- insult
- irony
- jokes
- observational
- quote
- role-play
- self deprecation
- vulgarity

- word play
- other

Anecdotes, jokes and word play are often studied in written texts, as discussed at the beginning of this section, and are characterised by their textual features; insult and self-deprecation are interpersonal speech events; fantasy refers to imaginary scenarios and overlaps with role-play; Hay (ibid.) illustrates vulgarity with scatological and sexual jokes, which cannot be separated from social norms and values. The formal and functional properties of humour are conflated at the same level in Hay's categorisation. Günther's (2003) taxonomy, displaying similar problems as Hay's taxonomy, is composed of what she calls 'humour manoeuvres' like 'playing with words', 'using vulgar language' and 'putting others down'.

A prolific strand of humour studies comes from Janet Holmes's workplace project. Holmes categorises humour according to its functions rather than forms. Holmes (2006b) and Holmes and Marra (2002a) divide humour in their data broadly into two types: supportive and contestive humour. Supportive humour arises when members of a conversation support a previous utterance by agreeing with, strengthening, or enriching it; contestive humour, by contrast, 'challenges, disagrees with or undermines' the previous utterance. This distinction assumes a somewhat discrete division between the supportive and contestive functions of humour. But as admitted by Holmes herself, it is hard to sustain (ibid.:39). I will discuss the point further by assessing one of her examples:

Context: Six men in regular meeting of a project team in a large commercial organisation. Callum has failed to update a header, leading Barry to think he's got the wrong document.

1 Call: I definitely sent you the right one

- 2 Barr: [laughs]  
3 Eric: yep Callum did fail his office management [laugh] word processing  
4 lesson  
5 Call: I find it really hard being perfect at everything

(ibid.:35)

Holmes comments that 'Eric makes Callum the target of a jocular insult', and 'Callum responds (line 5) by challenging or contesting Eric's claim with his own mock-modest claim'. Holmes therefore defines Callum's response to be contestive humour, although she is not explicit in terms of Eric's initial comment. However, a somewhat different interpretation can be presented: Eric 'insults' Callum by making up an unlikely story of the latter's failing his Word processing training, and laughs as he says it; these imply that the insult is not serious. Numerous studies have suggested that humour can be aggressive and affectionate at the same time (Boxer and Cortés-Conde, 1997; Eggins and Slade, 1997; Norrick, 2003; Partington, 2006; Schnurr and Chan, 2011) (see further discussion in §4.3.3). In fact, Eric saves Callum's face by playing down and avoiding a direct criticism of his mistake. Callum hence picks up the playfulness by making fun of himself. As such, Eric and Callum collaboratively construct play signalling rapport and support.

Holmes (2006b) also demonstrates in many examples that repeating what another conversationalist said is a sign of supportive humour. However, Maybin and Swann (2007a), applying Bakhtin's (1984[1929]) notion of double-voicing (see §2.4.4), show with their data that repetition is imbued with the speaker's stance to the utterance being recycled, and the stance can often be critical. To sum up, the boundaries between the supportive and contestive functions of humour are fuzzy. Drawing from her data analysis including the cited extract above, Holmes (2006b) concludes that women's humour is often supportive, whereas men's contestive. But as my alternative interpretation shows, the men may in fact



be doing support in a different way. With this account, I argue that the supportive and contestive functions of humour should go hand in hand in analysis.

#### **2.3.4. Empirical studies of the use of humour in the classroom**

Humour in the classroom, including language classrooms, has been widely explored in the fields of communication and psychology (Aylor and Oppliger, 2003; Bryant et al., 1979; Bryant et al., 1980; Bryant and Zillmann, 1989; Frymier et al., 2008; Gorham and Christophel, 1990; Kaplan and Pascoe, 1977; Kozlova, 2008; Neuliep, 1991; Poveda, 2005; Wanzer and Frymier, 1999; Wanzer et al., 2006; White, 2001; Ziv, 1988; Ziyaeemehr et al., 2011). The studies have yielded a large number of categories and subcategories of humour in this context. However, they provide very limited explanations of the content of and distinctions between categories, and often present no actual examples of humour. For example, Frymier and her colleagues (Frymier et al., 2008; Wanzer et al., 2006) investigate what they call appropriate and inappropriate humour uses in class. They asked 284 undergraduate students to describe examples of teachers' uses of humour in classes that they had attended. The researchers then coded these descriptions and came up with four categories under appropriate humour (related humour, humour unrelated to course material, self-disparaging humour, and unintentional humour), and four categories under inappropriate humour (disparaging humour: targeting students, disparaging humour: targeting others, offensive humour, and self-disparaging humour). Each of these categories contains a number of subcategories. Comprehensive as these categories are, Wanzer et al. (2006) admit that their study is subject to inaccuracy and vagueness of the students' descriptions of humour examples. I will further explain my use of some of the above categories in §3.2.3.

Among the above studies in communication and psychology, both Neuliep (1991) and White (2001) sent questionnaires to a large number of teachers to investigate their use of humour. The participants reported that they often used humour to release students' stress (Neuliep, 1991; White, 2001), attract their attention (Neuliep, 1991; White, 2001), reinforce memory of knowledge (White, 2001), show students that they are 'human' (Neuliep, 1991), make the lesson 'casual' (Neuliep, 1991), motivate students and provoke their thinking (White, 2001), and create 'a healthy learning environment' (White, 2001). White (2001) and Ziyaemehr (2011) also asked students about their teachers' uses of humour, and some of the frequent answers include releasing stress, attracting attention, motivating students, and creating affiliation. An interesting study was conducted in the 80s by Ziv (1988), which involved two groups of Statistics students taught by the same teacher. The teacher told jokes and showed cartoons to explain certain concepts when teaching the first group, but did not use humour at all when teaching the other. This experiment lasted for a semester, and at the end all students took an exam. The same procedures were conducted twice with different teachers and students. In both experiments, the groups that were taught with humour achieved better exam results than the ones taught with no humour. Many issues are raised by Ziv's research - the types of humour injected by the teachers were prepared and restricted, and thus did not reflect the use of discursive humour; there were many other variables which might have affected the students' exam outcome, e.g. the students' previous performance and tutoring outside the classroom. Nevertheless, the research did suggest that there might be positive effects of using humour in the classrooms.

## **2.4 Theories and frameworks**

This part of the chapter is devoted to the major theories and frameworks that will be adopted in the analysis of humour in my data. They are pragmatic and/or humour theories

that have been widely employed to analyse humour. These theories and frameworks will underlie much of the data analysis in Chapters 4 and 5. I will adopt certain other conceptions and terms in the data analysis, which will be explained as they emerge.

### **2.4.1. Grice's Cooperative Principle**

Paul Grice's theory of the Cooperative Principle (CP) (Grice, 1975) is regarded as one of the foundations of modern pragmatics. It has been acknowledged by various scholars to be an important framework for humour analysis, and has been applied in several humour studies (Attardo, 1993, 2003, 2008a; Kaufer, 1981; Kersten, 2009; Widdowson, 2008). According to the theory, a participant in a conversation, in order to get meaning across, should make a contribution as required by the purpose of the exchange. The information sender should obey four maxims:

- Quantity: be as informative as is required; do not be more informative than is required
- Quality: be truthful
- Relation: be relevant
- Manner: be clear and brief

Grice (*ibid.*) further articulates that a speaker can violate a maxim for various reasons. He/she can lie so as to mislead the hearer, or be inadequately informative because of lack of information. An interesting condition of maxim violation discussed by Grice is flouting a maxim: the speaker disobeys a maxim in order to convey implicit meanings, and the hearer, first failing to receive useful information from the literal words, may involve turns to another maxim and infers the implied meaning, or 'implicature' in Grice's word. One typical example of flouting a maxim is given in Grice (1989) when a professor is writing a

reference for a student X who is a candidate for a philosophy job. The professor simply writes: 'Dear Sir, Mr. X's command of English is excellent, and his attendance at tutorials has been regular. Yours etc.' Given that the professor knows the student very well, the implicature in such a short letter is that he is unable to make any further favourable comments on the student who may actually not be a suitable candidate. Here the professor is violating the maxim of quantity in order to fulfil the maxim of quality.

The CP, together with some later pragmatic theories derived from it, such as Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1995), has played an important role in humour research (Attardo, 2003). Grice himself actually applies his theory to explain irony as a first attempt in the field of humour. As Attardo (2005) claims, 'all jokes involve violations of one or more of Grice's maxims.' The following two examples are given in Attardo (*ibid.*: 272):

"Excuse me, do you know what time it is?"

"Yes."

The answer does not provide the information conventionally required by the question, so the maxim of quantity is violated.

"Why did the Vice President fly to Panama?"

"Because the fighting is over" (Johnny Carson, Jan. 19, 1990)

This was a fake story told by Johnny Carson, an American comedian, in 1990. He was teasing Dan Quayle, the Vice President at that time, for his cowardice by alluding to the fact that he enrolled in the National Guard allegedly to avoid serving in the Vietnam War. Carson violated the maxim of quality.

Attardo (*ibid.*) also criticises CP. He believes that CP is based on too strict a premise in that the speaker is committed to the truth and relevance of his/her utterance and the hearer is

aware of the commitment. If the hearer is in any doubt about the compliance of the speaker, that is to say, if the premise disappears, the hearer assumes a CP violation and suspends all inferences. As a result, the communication is invalid and no information is conveyed. However, in the case of jokes, a number of them 'do not flout, or exploit, the maxims' (Attardo, 1994:273). For example, in Attardo's first example, inadequate information is provided, while there is no way the hearer can work out any fulfilment of another maxim. Attardo believes that, according to CP, the natural conclusion is that joking causes invalid communication, hence is non-cooperative behaviour. This is unconvincing since jokes do make sense (at least they are recognised as jokes). Otherwise, the fact would not exist that, in many cultures, jokes are welcomed as a kind of art. Therefore, the strict premise of CP becomes problematic in analysing jokes. Attardo points out that 'two sets of contradictory facts are generated':

On the one hand, joking is a successful interpersonal and/or communicative exchange, and on the other hand, joking violates the principle of cooperation, which accounts precisely for successful interpersonal communication [...] If one acknowledges the presence of a violation of the principle of cooperation, accounting for the communicative aspects of jokes becomes a problem automatically.

Attardo (1993:543-4)

To address the inherent contradiction in CP, Raskin (1985) establishes a new layer of CP. He suggests that Grice's premise of the CP governs *bona-fide* (BF) communication. Under this communication mode, the hearer goes through the inference process as discussed above. Raskin then distinguishes a different mode of communication that is not governed by CP called *non-bona-fide* (NBF) communication. Lying, play acting and humour all belong to NBF mode. In the case of jokes, the speaker's purpose is not to convey information but rather to 'create a special effect with the help of the text, namely to make the hearer laugh' (ibid.: 101). The concept of NBF is very similar to Bateson's (1953)

notion of ‘play frame’, the idea that conversationalists can frame and signal their talk as play and hence not serious. In my analysis in Chapters 4-6, I will consider humour as violation of the maxims in a play frame. I use play frame instead of NBF because the former is developed for conversational contexts, and has been adopted in conversational humour studies such as Coates (2007).

### **2.4.2. Politeness Theory**

Grice’s theory of conversational implicature and the CP framework have given dramatic rise to the study of politeness<sup>9</sup> since the 1970s. To date, Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987) is still the most influential one, generating research in various social sciences. It has also been adopted in studies of conversational humour, e.g. Antonopoulou and Sifianou (2003), Holmes (2000), Holmes and Stubbe (2003), and Partington (2006), to show that humour is both a positive and negative politeness strategy (see explanation below). There are some key concepts in Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory:

- Face: a social self-image that a member of the society wants to set up and maintain; the concept derives from Goffman’s (1971) notion of face;
- Positive face: the desire for the self-image to be approved;
- Negative face: the want to be autonomous and not impeded by others;
- Face-threatening acts (FTAs): threats to a social member’s face, e.g. orders, suggestions, criticisms, etc.

Every social member has both positive and negative face. One strives to keep his/her own

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<sup>9</sup> For a general discussion of the definition of politeness see Pizziconi (2006). For a discussion of politeness in linguistics see Holmes (2006a).

social face, and at the same time to save others' face. However, face is always at risk because FTAs are impossible to avoid in daily life. Thus, social members develop politeness strategies to formulate messages in order to save the hearer's face. Brown and Levinson outline four main types of politeness strategies:

- Bald on record: the speaker abandons the want to minimise the threat to the hearer's face. According to Brown and Levinson, this usually occurs under conditions of substantial vast power difference<sup>10</sup> or by communicators who have reached a certain kind of agreement for the sake of efficiency.
- Positive politeness: the speaker attends to the hearer's positive face by showing approval or claiming the same wants and grounds. The strategy is most commonly used in situations where the communicators know each other fairly well. For example, one of two friends says to the other 'let's get on with dinner', which indicates an inclusive 'we' in the utterance as a sign of common ground.
- Negative politeness: the speaker satisfies the hearer's negative-face wants and avoids being imposing. Showing respect for the hearer's ability to maintain autonomy, the speaker says 'I know you've been sort of strapped for cash, but could I borrow £5?' This example is a very good illustration of negative politeness strategies.
- Off record strategy: the speaker allows more than one possible interpretation of his/her utterance. It is up to the hearer to decide which one to take. 'It's getting cold in here' can be an indirect request for the hearer to shut the window.

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<sup>10</sup> Wolfson (1989a, 1989b) and some later studies (Eisenstein and Bodman, 1993; Olshtain and Weinbach, 1993) interestingly conclude that the track along which social distance and politeness correlate is a reverse bell-shaped curve, or a "bulge". In the middle of the bulge, familiar but not intimate relationships tend to be the most polite ones, while politeness decreases to both ends where intimacy and strangers lie.

Politeness strategies and the notion of face have been adopted by researchers in analysing functions of humour. Attardo (1993) defines one of the social functions of humour, 'decommitment', as avoiding loss of face. Brown and Levinson (1987) actually include different types of humour in their list of politeness strategies. 'Joking is a basic positive-politeness technique' (ibid.: 124) as it can be used to stress shared backgrounds or values. Moreover, a number of rhetorical skills such as understatement/overstatement, irony and metaphor are also used in the indirect strategy of politeness. This is followed and developed by Holmes (2000) who points out and illustrates that the use of humour can be both a positive and negative politeness strategy.

Despite the significant influence of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, it has been widely criticised (cf. Coupland et al., 1988; Craig et al., 1986; Eelen, 2001; Watts, 2003). One major issue is that Brown and Levinson extract single utterances by individual speakers and use them as basic analytic units. This creates difficulties for analysis of natural conversations in which FTAs and politeness strategies are expressed discursively throughout on-going turns of talk (Holmes, 2006a). Besides, the validity of the notions of face and FTAs in non-European societies is questioned by researchers such as Felix-Brasdefer (2006), Gu (1990), Matsumoto (1988), and Nwoye (1992). In my analysis, I will draw on the concepts of face, positive and negative politeness, and the various politeness strategies. Speech acts involving face, hereafter face acts, will be a key notion in my analysis. Since I analyse mainly British lecturers' utterances (see §3.3), it is assumed that Brown and Levinson's concepts and notions are valid in this context. I will explore how my Chinese participants (see §3.3) react to the lecturers' face acts in humour in Chapters 5 and 6.



### 2.4.3. Theory of script incongruity

This section discusses the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) developed by Attardo and Raskin (Attardo, 1994; Attardo and Raskin, 1991; Raskin and Attardo, 1994), which is rooted in incongruity theories (§2.2.1), and is still the most comprehensive and dominant theory in the contemporary linguistic studies of humour. Raskin (1985) first puts forward the Semantic Script Theory of Humour (SSTH). A script is ‘a large chunk of semantic information surrounding the word or evoked by it’ (ibid.:81). It is a cognitive structure developed from the language speaker’s common sense of routines, and individual background, experience and knowledge shared within a certain group. As Norrick (2003) puts it, ‘[script] goes far beyond what a standard dictionary entry normally contains’. These scripts are represented as graphs with lexical nodes and semantic links between the nodes. Based on the concept of scripts, SSTH suggests a hypothesis in relation to jokes:

A text can be characterised as a single-joke-carrying text if both of the [following] conditions are satisfied:

The text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts

The two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite [...].

Raskin (1985: 99) cited in Attardo (1994:197)

In other words, there are two incongruous scripts overlapping within a joke. As such, the script theory of humour is an incongruity theory (§2.2.1). What should be noted is that what Raskin means by ‘opposite’ here is an abstract concept rather than an absolute contradiction. There exists in the text a ‘semantic script-switch trigger’ which forces the reader to switch from one script to the other, completing the process of a humorous effect. Raskin analyses the following joke as an example:

“Is the doctor at home?” the patient asked in his bronchial whisper. “No,” the doctor’s young and pretty wife whispered in reply. “Come right in.”

(ibid.: 100)

The hearer here will be faced with a puzzle set up by two scripts. One is the routine knowledge inquiry from a patient to the DOCTOR’S WIFE. The other is aroused from the ambiguous description of ‘whisper’ and ‘young and pretty wife’ as a LOVER. DOCTOR’S WIFE vs. LOVER invoke the opposite scripts of sex vs. non-sex. The puzzle remains until the hearer reaches the punchline ‘come right in’ and a switch from DOCTOR’S WIFE to LOVER, non-sex to sex is triggered, then everything is at last clear.

SSTH was originally proposed only for jokes in written text. It foregrounds the incongruous feature of scripts in jokes, and considers that humour arises from whole or partial resolution of the incongruity. As such, it does not take into consideration the sociocultural context of a joke. This theory was later revised by Raskin together with Attardo and was named the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) (Attardo and Raskin, 1991; Raskin and Attardo, 1994). Six knowledge resources (KRs) were introduced addressing the script opposition, the logical mechanism of a joke (corresponding to the incongruity-resolution theory as introduced in ‘incongruity theories’ in §2.2.1), the target or butt of a joke, the situation (the background which is ‘evoked by the scripts of the joke that are not funny’), the narrative strategy or genre, and the language (the lexical, syntactic and phonological, etc. choices of the text) (Attardo, 2008a:108). Although situation was included in GTVH to address the sociocultural context of a joke, according to Attardo and Raskin, it was not considered to be causing humour or its funniness. In this sense, both SSTH and GTVH attribute humour wholly to script incongruity, and exclude sociocultural context from the source of humour. This issue has been pointed out by Cook (2000:77), and is evidently problematic. If we take the joke above as an example, sex is a taboo

subject in many societies and hence a source of repressive humour (§2.2.1). Without this condition, the script shift in the joke would become only a surprise.

Despite Attardo and Raskin's later effort to extend the usage of GTVH, the analysis of conversational humour has remained barely affected by it, with the exception that Norrick (2003) attempts to apply GTVH to spontaneous conversational puns. However, he immediately admits that much research needs to be done to develop GTVH to a unified theory for conversational humour. In my analysis of humour in university lectures, I will apply the idea of script shift to explain humour at a linguistic level, and will approach fuller explanation of humour by resorting to the pragmatic theories as discussed previously in this section.

#### **2.4.4. Evaluation in humour**

Volosinov believes that all language uses are evaluative: '[t]here is no such thing as a word without evaluative accent' (1973[1929]:103). In my data, humour constantly invokes the speakers', mostly the lecturers', attitudes or stance towards certain objects, entities or propositions (see Chapters 4, 5 and 6). In this section, I will review literature on evaluation. Various labels have been used in the studies of this field including modality, evidentiality, affect, and hedging. Detailed overviews of these terms and relevant theories are included in Hunston and Thompson (2000) and Martin and White (2005:38-40). I will restrict my survey to mainly humour-related subjects in the field of linguistics, focusing on theories and frameworks to be employed in my data analysis in Chapters 4-6, and explaining how these studies can inform my own study.

## **Studies of evaluation in humour: irony and others**

The study of humour from a critical perspective in anthropology, psychology and sociology, such as Douglas (1975), Koestler (1964), and Mulkay (1988), foregrounds the evaluative function of humour. Scholars in these fields believe that ‘humour functions to expose social differences and conflicts’ and is the ‘expression of difference’ (Eggins and Slade, 1997:156-157). Many linguistic studies reveal that humour, especially teasing, is often used to convey subversive or contentious face work and perform in-group building (Eggins and Slade, 1997; Holmes, 2007; Holmes and Marra, 2002b; Partington, 2006). Face work and evaluation are inextricably linked in that evaluating someone’s personality, work or behaviour is always face threatening. I will explore this further in Chapters 4 and 5. Irony<sup>11</sup> has long been associated with evaluation (Nelms, 2001:4). Kaufer (1981) argues that irony conveys a clear evaluative judgement of the audience, and therefore is an evaluative speech behaviour. Kotthoff (2003) suggests that irony ‘is a way of communicating an evaluation gap’ (ibid.:1390), and the evaluation assigns an entity a value on a continuous scale between the positive and negative poles. Furthermore, Kotthoff (ibid.:1390) believes that irony very often alludes to in-group knowledge, so it ‘allows us to re-affirm the in-group relations among friends’.

However, none of the above studies foregrounds evaluation in their analysis of humour. Eggins and Slade (1997) is one of the few attempts to investigate humour in conversation and its relation to evaluation. Adopting a preliminary version of the Appraisal System (AS) which is further developed in Martin and White (2005) in the domain of systemic

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<sup>11</sup> The difference between irony and sarcasm is subtle and often overlooked by researchers Nelms (2001:5). For an extensive comparison of these two terms, please refer to Nelms (ibid.:5-12) and Partington (2006:182-83).

functional linguistics (SFL), they claim that humour is a semantic resource of AS; humour devices including teasing, telling dirty jokes and funny stories can be applied to negotiate attitudes and alignments. Below I will briefly introduce AS.

Martin and his colleagues develop a three-dimensional appraisal system (Martin, 2000; Martin and White, 2005). This system is concerned with how writers/speakers in texts construe their feelings and stance towards the material they present, and position these feelings/stance with respect to those of the potential audience (Martin and White, 2005:1-2). AS consists of three domains, each of which is divided into some sub-domains:

**Attitude** is concerned with feelings. It contains three sub-domains:

- Affect - emotional reactions (happy vs. sad; confident vs. anxious; interested vs. bored)
- Judgement - attitudes towards behaviour (admire, criticise or condemn)
- Appreciation - evaluation of things (good vs. bad; interesting vs. boring)

**Engagement** is concerned with ‘how speakers acknowledge alternative positions to their own’ (ibid.:37).

**Graduation** is concerned with gradability, i.e., the adjustment of level of intensity of evaluation.

- Force - the degree of attitude, i.e., how strong or weak the feeling is
- Focus - when non-gradable entities are involved, graduation is realised through ‘adjusting the strength of boundaries between categories’ (ibid.:37). This can be understood as the level of deviation of certain peripheral category from the standard category. Focus can be sharpen or soften. Below are some examples given by the

authors:

- Sharpen: a fully-fledged, award-winning, gold-plated monster; all alone
- Soften: a word ... spelled somewhat like terrorists; about 60 years old

AS is the most comprehensive schematic framework of evaluation in texts. Nevertheless, developed within the theoretical framework of SFL, AS is located at the level of discourse semantics (ibid.:33), and derives its analysis of evaluation from lexical and grammatical items (modal verbs, adjectives, adjuncts, etc.). As a result, the system does not deal with pragmatic meanings, which, as explained in §2.3.2, is significant to the linguistic study of humour. So AS is inadequate for the analysis of humour. This limitation is acknowledged by Martin (2000:163-164) himself in an attempt to analyse sarcasm, which ‘raises the more general problem of humour and appraisal. [... H]ow is it that we recognise that someone means the opposite of what they say’. Such drawback becomes more evident when AS is applied in analysis of conversation. For example, Eggins and Slade (1997:116-167) apply a preliminary model of AS to analyse a casual conversation between five male workmates. Commenting on the scenario of having been asked about criminal records in a naturalisation ceremony, one participant says, “that would be wonderful if they ever asked me” (ibid.:118). The authors classify ‘wonderful’ as judgement, but do not address the incongruous attitude that it conveys. With this account, I will not employ the AS framework in my study, but will borrow some of its terms to describe different types of appraisal in my analysis.

### **The evaluative function of narratives**

Based on his study of alienated African American young men in the 1960s, Labov and his colleagues (Labov, 1972; Labov and Waletzky, 1967) develop a sociolinguistic model of

narratives, which outlines the structural properties of oral stories or personal experience.

This model consists of six parts, not all of which need to be present in any one narrative:

- Abstract: what the story is about;
- Orientation: the setting of the story including time, place, people and their activity;
- Complicating action: temporally sequenced events happened in the story;
- Evaluation: the point of the narrative; the speaker's attitude to the events narrated;
- Resolution: the result or solution;
- Coda: the connection of the story to the present time.

This model foregrounds evaluation, as Labov and Waletzky (1967) propose an evaluative function of narratives beyond their usual function of conveying information and recapitulating experience - narratives establish a resource for conversationalists to assess and confirm affiliation (Cortazzi and Jin, 2000:105; Eggins and Slade, 1997:229). This view is informative to the current study because story-telling is a frequent genre of humour as noticed in my data (see §4.3.1). Based on this, it is worthwhile to analyse story-telling separately and discover how lecturers deliver their evaluation through humour, and how this influences the students' involvement.

### **Evaluation in language creativity**

Because the study of language creativity contains a strong focus on humour (see §2.3.1 above), it is useful to learn how evaluation is attended to in this field. As compared to evaluation in Labov's model, Maybin and Swann (2007a) propose a much broader sense of this concept. Through identifying approaches that have been or may be drawn on in the analysis of creativity, they suggest a three-dimensional approach to the analysis of language creativity - textual (linguistic forms including properties of words, modes and

genres), contextual (sociohistorical and interpersonal contexts contributing to the interpretation of creative language), and critical dimensions. The critical dimension entails two senses: firstly, creative language itself is always evaluative; secondly, creative language highlights the evaluative function of language, and hence draws 'developed critique of social relations/positions and associated values' (ibid.:513). In the sense of the second point, creativity is reflexive in that creative 'language draws attention to itself'(ibid.:503).

Maybin and Swann's work is intended to deal with poetic creativity, and hence has a strong focus on language form. This is reflected in their reliance on semantic and paralinguistic properties, e.g. repetition, tone of voice, etc., to identify and interpret creativity.

Widdowson (2008) argues that this is inadequate for the analysis of creativity; for him, creativity is best understood from a pragmatic perspective. I follow Widdowson's opinion in my study of humour. In addition, I argue that evaluation in humour is not only formally marked by semantic and paralinguistic properties, but also signalled by pragmatic properties, i.e. violation of Grice's maxims (§2.4.1). I also argue that, in either case, the understanding of evaluation lies in shared knowledge - formal cues on many occasions only signal the existence of something extraordinary; evaluation can still be concealed or remain ambiguous even if the formal cues are noticed. This may explain why, although humour is marked, it is often used as a resource to disguise serious work on social differences and conflicts (Eggins and Slade, 1997:167; Holmes, 2007:520). The arguments I raised above will be investigated in Chapters 4 and 5.

### **Heteroglossia and double-voicing**

Bakhtin argues that all verbal texts are dialogic in that utterances always refer to previous



utterances on the one hand, and anticipate the responses of an imagined audience on the other (Bakhtin, 1981[1935]; Volosinov, 1973[1929]). Bakhtin emphasises the social and ideological forces that shape language. Different voices associated with different contexts and social groups compose language, and this multi-voiced nature of language is termed heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 1981[1935]). Maybin and Swann (2006, 2007a) apply the notion of heteroglossia in their analysis of the critical properties of language creativity. Heteroglossia is used to explain ‘the artful juxtaposition or dialogic positioning of social languages within texts, and their animation in double-voicing’ (2007a:504). The idea of double-voicing is that reported speech, i.e. the reporting of other people’s words, is a ubiquitous feature of everyday talk (Bakhtin, 1981[1935]), but when we recycle other people’s language, we endow the language with our own stance on top of that of the original speaker (Bakhtin, 1984[1929]). Maybin and Swann (2007a) provide an example of double-voicing: in an online chatroom, several participants are chatting about the marriage of Prince Charles and Camilla Parker-Bowles. One participant criticises people who get ‘so worked up’ about the behaviour of the royal family, and finishes with ‘good grief indeed’, which echoes a previous utterance from another participant who expresses sincere grief over Princess Diana. This echo is interpreted as an instance of double-voicing, in that it signals the speaker’s critical attitude towards the grieving participant. Humorous instances of this type are pervasive in my data. As the analysis in Chapters 4 and 5 shows, the notions of heteroglossia and double-voicing recur throughout my data.

## 2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I first provided an overview of some explanations of the nature and source of humour (§2.2.1). This review shows that humour is a complex and interdisciplinary subject. A brief review of humour in Chinese culture in §2.2.2 suggests that it has prevailed

throughout Chinese history, but was historically unwelcome in Chinese orthodox literature and philosophy. I then discussed literature on humour which is more directly relevant to the current study, i.e. linguistic studies of humour and empirical studies of humour in the classroom (§2.3.1 and §2.3.3-4). This further demonstrated the lack of qualitative investigation into humour in academic contexts which was pointed out in §1.1.3. I also provided a discussion in §2.3.2 of how the current study is positioned in the theoretically separate domains of semantics and pragmatics, emphasising the role of the latter in my study. In the final part of the chapter, I reviewed some major theories and frameworks that have been widely employed in humour studies, i.e. Grice's cooperative principle, politeness theory, theory of script incongruity, and works relating to evaluation in humour. These theories and frameworks will be directly adopted in the analysis of humour in Chapters 4 and 5.

## **3. Research Methods**

### **3.1 Introduction**

Humour in British academic lectures, as revealed in the literature review, has been under-investigated. This PhD study is exploratory; I combined my own data with an existing data set, and the analyst's perspective with those of the research participants. The study can be divided into two stages:

Stage 1: an examination of forms and functions of humour in BASE

Stage 2: a fieldwork investigation

In the first two sections of this chapter, I will explain the two stages, showing the justification for each of them along the way. In the last section, I will at first discuss the triangulation of methods and data in the study. At the end, some overarching conceptual and methodological issues of my research design will be accounted for.

### **3.2 Stage 1: examine forms and functions of humour in BASE**

#### **3.2.1. Purposes**

This stage is designed to conceptualise and categorise forms and functions of humour in British academic lectures. Its primary purpose is to answer the research question below:

- What are the formal and functional properties of humour in British academic lectures?

I have introduced in the introduction Holmes' (2000) definition of humour as a starting

point of the thesis. Through reviewing the large number of instances of humour in the BASE corpus, this stage also aims to investigate how prevalent humour is in British academic lectures, and eventually develop a characterisation of the humour in my study.

### **3.2.2. Data and data selection**

In this section, I will firstly introduce my data source the British Academic Spoken English (BASE) corpus, and then I will explain how instances of humour were identified and selected from this corpus.

#### **Language corpora and the BASE corpus**

A corpus is a systematic collection of speech or writing in one or more than one language (Matthews, 2007). The value of an extensive corpus is that, with the support of computers, it enables both micro and macro levels of description and analysis of language use in various settings. In the case of spoken corpora, such language comes from actual and attested speech events (Adolphs and Carter, 2007). The study of conversational humour can be facilitated by spoken corpora as they provide easily accessible and systematic data and evidence, which then can save the time of duplicated data collection. My research aims to identify major properties of humour in lectures. For this purpose, observations and analysis of a large number of actual lectures are beneficial to my research. Therefore, I decided to use an academic spoken corpus as my data source for stage 1. The data I intend

to work with are transcripts and video recordings of lectures from the BASE corpus<sup>12</sup>.

BASE consists of 160 lectures and 39 seminars recorded in a variety of university departments. The total number of words in the transcripts in BASE is 1.6 million. Holdings are distributed evenly across four broad disciplinary groups. These groups are: Arts and Humanities (AH), Social Studies and Sciences (SS), Physical Sciences (PS), and Life and Medical Sciences (LS). Of the 160 lectures, 95 were video-recorded, and the remaining lectures were audio-recorded<sup>13</sup>.

### **Identifying and selecting humour episodes in BASE**

Most researchers, including Bell (2002, 2005), Coates (2007), Hay (1995), Holmes (2000), Kozlova (2008), and Norrick (1993), draw on paralinguistic and prosodic cues in video or audio recordings to identify humour instances in conversations. The paralinguistic and prosodic cues that are mentioned in these studies can be referred to using Gumperz's (1982a, 2001) term 'contextualisation cues' - any verbal, nonverbal and prosodic signs that are processed by participants of communication to construct the contextual ground of an utterance and subsequently its interpretation. Contextualisation cue-based identification of humour is efficient but insufficient: if the speaker's cues are considered, instances like so-called dry humour, when the speaker jokes unmarkedly, will be excluded; if the hearer's

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<sup>12</sup> The recordings and transcriptions used in this study come from the British Academic Spoken English (BASE) corpus. The corpus was developed at the Universities of Warwick and Reading under the directorship of Hilary Nesi and Paul Thompson. Corpus development was assisted by funding from BALEAP (British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes), EURALEX (European Association for Lexicography), the British Academy and the Arts and Humanities Research Council. The corpus is available from the Oxford Text Archive <http://ota.ox.ac.uk/hearders/2525.xml>, and the two university websites below: Warwick <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/research/collect/base/>; Coventry <http://wwwm.coventry.ac.uk/researchnet/BASE/Pages/BASE.aspx>. Research related to BASE can also be found on the latter two websites.

<sup>13</sup> At the time of the research, the audio recordings were not accessible, and were therefore not referred to in my study.

cues are considered, instances of missed, misunderstood or simply dismissed humour will be excluded. The majority of the above-mentioned scholars do not address humour without marked cues in their research. One exception is Kozlova (2008), who includes in 'contextual and linguistic cues' of humour what she calls 'markers of irony' and 'markers of teases' (ibid.:63-65). These markers take into consideration discoursal features such as exaggeration, tag questions, and the speaker's confession of a play frame (§2.4.1). In addition, a study on multi-modal markers of irony by Attardo et al. (2003) suggests that one type of delivery of irony can be described as a 'blank face' and consists no 'overt marker of ironical, sarcastic, or humorous intent' (ibid.:244). The current study includes both humour marked and unmarked with contextualisation cues noticed in the transcripts or video recordings, and sees that the identification of the latter relies on discoursal features such as violation of Grice's maxims (§2.4.1), the audience's responses, and contextual knowledge.

To address the hearer's cues of humour, Hay (1996) proposes, followed by Holmes (2000) and Bell (2009a, 2009c), two types of humour: successful humour and failed humour. The former refers to instances in which the hearer appreciates and responds to the humour, while the latter receives scarce or no responses. Most studies ignore failed humour (cf. Attardo, 2005:15; Bell, 2009c). In my research, I study both types of humour. Nevertheless, I argue against the presumption of such a distinction, which reduces the success of humour to the hearer's instant responses. A person making a humorous utterance does not always expect overt responses (unless in comedy performance), especially when the utterance is fleeting and responses may interrupt the on-going flow of speech. This is especially salient in lectures where all activities are underpinned by the purpose of teaching and learning. Bell and Attardo (2010) question the validity of viewing laughter in response to humour as

the criterion of its success. Instead, they define successful humour in interactive settings in terms of the hearer's recognition of the speaker's intention to be funny and whether the hearer considers the utterance to be funny. According to this definition, humour not greeted with laughter can still be successful. However, in BASE, there are few means to study the audience's reactions beyond laughter (the reason for this is further explained in the next paragraph), not to say to judge their cognitive perception of the lecturer's intention. In my study of both the BASE data and the Small Corpus data (see §3.3), I do not adopt the distinction between successful and failed humour, but discuss separately humour with and without laughter in response. This is a straightforward distinction because laughter is a relatively discernible cue of humour. Humour without laughter in response will be identified in data collected by myself in Stage 2, and I will argue further in §3.3.2 ('identifying and transcribing humour episodes') that humour of this type is not necessarily failed.

- Laughter tags in BASE

In BASE, a non-continuous single laughing event is tagged as 'laugh', and repeated (iterated) laughter is tagged as 'laughter'. Different mark-ups distinguish the producer(s) of the laughter, i.e. the lecturer, one or more member(s) of the audience, and the lecturer together with some of the audience (explanation of the different mark-ups can be found in Nesi and Thompson (2006)). Humour instances tagged as 'laughter' were chosen for further qualitative analysis in this study. This was because 'laugh' almost always refers to the speaker's own vocal event. Since I intended to locate mainly humour recognised by more than one participant, only 'laughter' was taken into consideration. Using the

concordance function<sup>14</sup> in Wordsmith 5.0 to search for ‘laughter’ tags (LTs), 1114 concordance lines were generated in the 160 lectures (Figure 3.1 shows an extract from these lines).

Concordance

pity we're all saying the same thing and don't realize it <pause dur="1.5"/><vocal desc="laughter" iterated="y" n="ss" dur="1"/> i tried to butt in :  
in expressing her ideas opinions and rude in rejecting other people's opinions <vocal desc="laughter" iterated="y" n="ss" dur="1"/> right or this one  
idea until at last one of my friends says they accept mine <pause dur="1.5"/><vocal desc="laughter" iterated="y" n="ss" dur="1"/> it annoys me wh  
tutors they were active participants and others wanted to be on the cassette <vocal desc="laughter" iterated="y" n="ss" dur="1"/> this talk struggle  
annoys me when people emphasize words all the time <pause dur="0.2"/><vocal desc="laughter" iterated="y" n="ss" dur="1"/> there was some  
# a couple of years back if you have a look at page two # oh sorry i haven't <vocal desc="laughter" iterated="y" n="ss" dur="2"/> given them out o  
a teacher trainer who has to work together sometimes with someone i don't like <vocal desc="laughter" iterated="y" n="ss" dur="1"/> i think that was ;  
interesting one i should try to work with someone i don't like <pause dur="0.9"/><vocal desc="laughter" iterated="y" n="ss" dur="1"/> this is important

Figure 3.1 Some concordance lines of LTs in BASE (generated by Wordsmith 5.0)

Nonetheless, the cause of laughter is complicated since it involves linguistic and psychological factors. Many conversation analysts have studied laughter in discourse. Although in some of their early work (Jefferson, 1979; Tannen, 1984) laughter is seen as a close index of humour, Jefferson (1984) examines laughter in non-humorous contexts; and Glenn (2003) emphasises the many other stimuli of laughter including socialising, nervousness, and embarrassment. BASE does not transcribe other non-verbal reactions from the audience. Meanwhile, although 95 lectures (out of 160) have video recordings, there are only occasional and brief shots of the audience. So there are few means to study the audience's reactions beyond laughter in the BASE data. This study was pursued using my own data in stage 2.

- Reducing the number of LTs

The audience in the BASE lectures are of five different student levels, and there are also a

<sup>14</sup> A concordance, generated by computational corpus software, is a list of unconnected lines of text containing the searchword; the searchword usually locates at the centre of each line surrounded by its co-text on both sides.



small number of lectures for staff. Table 3.1 displays the division of LTs in BASE by level of students/type of audience:

Student level/Audience type	No. of lectures	No. of LTs
UG <sup>i</sup>	104	331
UG/PG	25	311
PG <sup>ii</sup>	17	296
Staff	7	85
Others	4	39
Pre-sessional <sup>iii</sup>	3	52
<b>Total</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>1114</b>

Table 3.1. Division of LTs by audience types

<sup>i</sup>UG- undergraduate; <sup>ii</sup>PG- postgraduate; <sup>iii</sup>The pre-sessional lectures were preparatory courses for international students who were about to start their undergraduate or postgraduate studies.

Further analysis of Table 3.1 is included in §4.1.1. Staff and others lectures were firstly excluded to make sure that all my samples represented higher education. The three pre-sessional lectures were for international students who were about to start their undergraduate or postgraduate studies, hence were regarded as part of higher education and included in my study. The remaining 990 LTs were spread over 149 lectures. A close review of the LTs across disciplinary groups and individual lectures was performed, based on which 327 LTs in 58 lectures were selected for further discussion. The review will be included in §4.1.2 and §4.2.

- Filtering out humorous episodes

The 327 LTs with their co-texts were extracted and reviewed. The default length of the co-texts was 25 words on both sides of the LT respectively, and would be extended during the analysis until adequate comprehension of the utterance was achieved by me. Their video recordings, if available, were also watched. In this reading, I filtered out LTs which were not considered to be humour-related. Instances with the following characteristics were excluded:

- Unclear utterance and events due to inaudible recordings, unfilmed visions and untranscribed nonverbal elements;
- Small incidents such as lights switching off and mobile phones ringing;
- Some instances were excluded based on prudent considerations. This meant that any instances, whose relation to humour was uncertain after reviewing available resources in BASE, were excluded. This is because BASE resources reveal limited nonverbal or contextual information as explained in §3.2.4. As a result some of the disqualified laughter might have been classified as possible instances of humour if relevant nonverbal or contextual information had been available. The example below is one such instance:

L: this is the cover of the Radio Times can you see that, it's got Helen Baxendale

SS: <laughter>

(ahlct014)

In this example, as he spoke, the lecturer held in his hands the magazine, *Radio Times*, showing the audience its cover. However, the cover did not show clearly in the video of this lecture. The subsequent laughter from the audience might have

been triggered by the cover of Radio Times, which might contain funny content.

The laughter might also indicate the audience's somewhat derisive attitude toward the British TV actress Helen Baxendale. There might also be other reasons for the laughter which could not be identified from either the video or the transcript of the incident. Since there were not adequate resources to identify the cause of the laughter, this example was excluded from my further analysis.

The explanation of laughter in some instances including the one below, according to their transcripts (they were not video recorded), seemed to be that the audience appeared tense because they had not been able to catch up with the lecturer, who then noticed and acknowledged this situation, triggering bouts of anxiety-releasing laughter. But since I could not be certain of what had caused the laughter, these examples were also excluded from my further investigation.

L: is that clear I'll take it slower

SL: <laughter>

(pslct015)

The remaining examples were then examined, and consecutive texts which occurred in the same events were combined. By doing so, 157 episodes were obtained from the BASE corpus. They were the final samples for my research and named humour episodes (HEs). For further methodological discussion of how these HEs were defined and their relation to humour, see §3.4.2.

### **3.2.3. Data analysis: coding forms and functions of humour**

In this section, I will explain various aspects of analysing the HEs. I will start with a discussion of Conversation Analysis (CA). CA has been an important tool for studying

conversational humour and laughter, hence it is necessary for me to estimate how compatible CA is with the current study.

### **A tool for studying laughter in interaction: conversation analysis**

Starting in the 1960s in American sociology, CA is a distinct and well-established method of examining 'talk-in-interaction', i.e. the habits, patterns, and structures of speech that are not reducible to one's personality, character, mood and so on (Wooffitt, 2001:52).

Conversation analysts are interested in interaction patterns such as turn-taking, sequence organisation, repair and action formation (a detailed summary of relevant studies can be found in Heritage (2001)). CA has made significant contribution to studies of conversational humour: this tradition has generated a series of studies of laughter in conversations (Antonopoulou and Sifianou, 2003; Glenn, 1989; Günther, 2003; Haakana and Sorjonen, 2011; Jefferson, 1979, 1984; Jefferson et al., 1987). Furthermore, its insights and techniques have informed the tradition of Interactional Sociolinguistics, which was originated by Gumperz (1982a, 1982b) and has produced quite a few studies on humour in conversations (Davies, 2003; Glenn, 2003; Kothoff, 2003; Norrick and Spitz, 2008; Tannen, 1984) .

Strict conversation analysts limit the involvement of context to only what is revealed by speakers themselves (Wetherell et al., 2001a:18; 2001b:387). Although I recognise the value of CA in the scrutiny of laughter in interaction, humour is context-dependent, so the compatibility of pure CA to my analysis is questionable. Furthermore, the speech in lectures is largely monologic, thus is not characteristic of CA's main themes such as turn-taking. Based on the above two considerations, I argue that CA should not become the prime method of my data analysis, but its general technique of sequential analysis of

speaking practices will be borrowed.

## **Coding scheme**

I have reviewed various attempts at categorising conversational humour in §2.3.3-4, and pointed out their limitations. Among these attempts, a series of quantitative studies are focused on humour in the classroom (§2.3.4). These studies produce extended functional taxonomies of humour in this context. But they provide very limited explanations of the content of and distinctions between categories, and often present no actual examples of humour. Apart from these studies, Kozlova (2008) concerns humour in some American university lectures. From her data she concludes that teachers' humour functions to affiliate with their students, and meanwhile maintain their authority in class. She studies only interactions between teachers and students, and does not cover teachers' monologues which are a large part of my research interest.

Considering the limitations of the various attempts to categorise humour, I decided not to apply one single taxonomy as a preliminary coding scheme. I derived my own coding scheme from the BASE data, and referred to others' categories when available. My coding scheme should reflect the complexity of humour and hence needs to be multi-dimensional. One multi-dimensional framework is put forward by Maybin and Swann (2007a) in language creativity, a strand of study that is closely relevant to humour. I decided to follow their broad distinctions of dimensions in the initial coding:

- Textual: playing with linguistic forms including properties of words, modes and genres, e.g. word play, narrative structure, etc.; paralinguistic features are also included here;

- Contextual: sociohistorical and interpersonal contexts surrounding the creative language;
- Critical: creativity is subjected to evaluation and criticism; creativity emerges at critical moments when socially difficult utterance such as challenging authority is taking place.

### **The coding process**

In order to build a multi-dimensional framework, I repeatedly examined, coded and re-coded the HEs (for the definitions of HEs and their relation to humour, see §3.4.2). In the initial coding, notes were made of an HE's textual, contextual and critical properties. In addition, instances of maxim violation (§2.4.1) or politeness strategies (§2.4.2) were also noted down. All notes within each type were then compared to discover common properties which were then highlighted and summarised. Nevertheless, the difficulty of coding contextual properties soon became dominant. Maybin and Swann (2007a) acknowledge the difficulty, and emphasise that the quantity of contextual information that a researcher should investigate and reveal is an unsolved issue. In practice, the inexhaustible and diverse contextual details of each HE make it impractical to draw similarities. With this account, I decided to only refer to contextual properties in the analysis when necessary. After this adjustment, textual and critical properties and instances of maxim violation and politeness strategies were coded. They were then re-coded and reclassified and eventually developed into an analytical framework (see Chapter 4).

### **3.2.4. The Methodological issues**

#### **The limitations of corpora as evidence of language**

The uses of computerised language corpora have often been considered critically by scholars (cf. Carter, 1998; Cook, 1998; Widdowson, 2004). One limitation pointed out by Cook (1998), which is closely relevant to my use of BASE, is that language corpora do not show the salience of different audiences' receptions as individuals pay attention to and notice different things. BASE provides little resource of learning the audience's receptions (see the discussion of laughter tags in BASE in §3.2.2). I acknowledge that the analysis of the BASE data cannot and is not intended to reconstruct the students' live understanding of humour in the lectures. It should be taken as the analyst's interpretations of the transcribed utterances with systematic efforts made to mitigate subjectivity and approximate the students' live understanding. Furthermore, despite the large number of lectures recorded in BASE, they cannot represent all types of academic lectures in one university, not to say all universities in Britain. It is unrealistic to expect that the analysis will cover all potential forms or uses of humour in British academic lectures considering the limited time and resources.

#### **The reconstruction of non-verbal elements in the BASE transcripts**

As Adolphs and Carter (2007:134) point out, communication is multimodal, by which they mean communication 'is embodied and combines both verbal and non-verbal elements'. In their view, a full understanding of recorded communication would require knowledge of non-verbal elements such as facial expressions, gestures, postures, and the layout of the recorded setting. They also call for integration in analysis of words, images and sound while admitting that most present spoken corpora 'do not, at the present time, enable the

representation and exploration of language and communication *beyond the textual* (Authors' italics). As for my research interest, personal experience in lectures reminds me that lecturers almost always resort to non-verbal elements to create humorous effect. Transcripts in BASE record a certain number of nonverbal events, but they are often inadequate and sometimes inconsistent - some transcripts with LTs were unintelligible; in others the lack of nonverbal information made it impossible to tell whether they were humorous or not. Moreover, only 95 out of the 160 lectures in BASE have available video recordings. So problems of understanding non-verbal elements remain for the majority of the data. To make the best use of the transcripts and video recordings in BASE, in my data analysis, if available, relevant video recordings were always referred to. When no videos were available for some unintelligible or ambiguous transcripts, I would abandon the data.

### **Contextual information in BASE and considerations of variables**

In conversations, speakers constantly refer to what exists beyond the here and now. It is self-evident that contextual knowledge is important in understanding the meaning of utterances. Humour is context-dependent, so having adequate contextual knowledge is important for decoding humour in interactions. The holding list of BASE provides background information including the name and gender of the lecturer, the subject and department of the lecture, and the type and number of the audience. However, the participant's age, ethnicity, education and intimacy between participants, which are considered as variables of humour in Hay (1995), are missing. This then may cause difficulties when I try to interpret and analyse the humorous utterance in the lectures.

The above discussion exemplifies shortcomings with using existing data developed for the purposes other than the current study. It may be suggested that they can be alleviated in



part by tailored procedures of data collection and processing, and thus I collected my own data in Stage 2.

### **3.3 Stage 2: a fieldwork investigation**

#### **3.3.1. Purposes and rationale**

This stage had two main purposes. Firstly, it aimed to collect my own lecture data for the investigation of formal and functional properties of humour in British academic lectures. For this purpose, I recorded and developed a Small Corpus of humour instances in nine British university lectures. Since the recording was designed and conducted by myself, the data can, to a certain extent, improve on the shortcomings of the BASE data explained in §3.2.4. The second purpose of Stage 2 was to investigate the three research questions below:

- Building on the study of the BASE data, what are the functions of humour in the Small Corpus?
- How do the Chinese students in the study perceive humour in the lectures?
- How do the lecturers in this study account for their use of humour in the lectures?

The initial interest of this research (see Chapter 1) and my identity as a Chinese student in Britain decided the focus of this study on Chinese students in British universities. As the first study of this kind in the U.K., it was important to ask how the Chinese students actually perceive such humour. So it was necessary to invite some Chinese students to talk about humour in lectures. One way to do this was to ask the students simply to talk about humour they encountered in lectures in the manner of Wanzer et al. (2006) (§2.3.4). A study on failed humour by Bell and Attardo (2010) also asked the participants to provide

examples of humour, in which six international students in the U.S. kept diaries of and discussed in sessions utterances that occurred in their daily life that they thought were funny, or that were not funny to them but intended to be so. By doing so, the researchers identified a rich collection of instances of failed humour reported by the participants themselves. However, as elaborated in §1.1.1 and §1.1.3, the hypothesis of this study is that Chinese students have difficulty in and are even unaware of humour in lectures. Thus relying on the students to provide examples of humour was problematic. As a result, I needed to prepare the examples for the discussions. One rich source is the BASE corpus, but it provides only unauthentic examples for the participants in the sense that they did not attend the lectures, and hence lack insider knowledge. To test the feasibility of applying the BASE data, I played some video extracts to two Chinese undergraduates in an English university. They remarked that it was extremely difficult to understand what was going on in the lectures because they were not there. With these accounts, I decided to record some new academic lectures, and interview the lecturers and some students in the audience.

The research design elaborated below borrows ideas from Kozlova (2008) and Nelms (2001). Nelms (*ibid.*) studied sarcasm in interactions between students and teachers in some university lectures. She video recorded over 40 hours of lectures taught by 8 lecturers at the University of Florida, played selections of recordings to the lecturers and students (42 in total), and interviewed them regarding the uses of sarcasm in these classes. Kozlova (2008) was interested in negotiation of identities through humour by international teaching assistants (ITAs) in university classrooms in the U.S. She video recorded 20 hours of lectures taught by four ITAs, and later interviewed them and some of the students (18 in total). The method of recording and playing selections of the recordings to the participants in both studies generated large amount of data deriving from actual examples of humour in

the lectures. I decided to adopt the method. However, my research procedures differ from the above two studies in many ways. These differences will be pointed out in the sections below when I explain Stage 2.

### **3.3.2. Data and data collection**

In this section, I explain the design of the procedures for my data collection and the types of data they generate.

#### **Overview**

Between October 2009 and June 2010, nine academic lectures with a total duration of 12 hours and 50 minutes were audio recorded in two university departments in England. One hundred and seventy one HEs were identified by me in these lectures (see §3.4.2 for how these HEs were defined). After this, 39 Chinese students (35 from Mainland, 3 from Macau, and 1 from Hong Kong), who had attended these lectures, took part in some playback and discussion sessions in which they were asked to comment on some selected audio extracts from the lectures regarding potential humour they perceived in them. The lecturers were also interviewed.

#### **Lecturer participants and their recruitment**

Seven lecturers (five males and two females) were recruited through personal contacts. Calls for participants were firstly emailed to the academic staff in an applied linguistic department in a Russell Group university<sup>15</sup> in the Midlands where I used to study. Three

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<sup>15</sup> The Russell Group is an association of 20 British universities. It was established in 1994, and contains many of the U.K.'s leading universities. More information can be found on the Russell Group website [www.russellgroup.ac.uk](http://www.russellgroup.ac.uk).

lecturers, who had previous contact with me, replied and volunteered to take part in the research. After the fieldwork was finished in this department, with help from a personal contact, I was introduced to the associate dean of a business school of a Post-92 university<sup>16</sup> in the Midlands. He was interested in my study and agreed to help recruiting lecturers in his department. He then invited some of his colleagues who had or were expected to have a large number of Chinese students in their lectures<sup>17</sup> to participate in my research. Eventually, four lecturers agreed to be my participants. All of the seven lecturers recruited for my research had been living in Britain for more than ten years by the time of the research, and speak English as their first language. All but one have British nationality, and all but two were born and brought up in Britain; one (Amy) was ethnic Japanese born in Ireland, and one (Deep) was ethnic Indian born in India.

I had a private meeting with each lecturer before the data collection. I explained to them that the general interest of my research was about classroom language and the influence of culture on Chinese students' understanding in lectures, but did not disclose the specific focus on humour. The reason was that the knowledge of this focus would probably influence the ways the participants behave in class, and therefore damage the naturalistic nature of the data which I regarded as significant for studying spontaneous humour. In the meeting, I also discussed with them the plans of recording lectures, and went through with them the informed consent form (Appendix 1). They were then asked to sign the forms.

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<sup>16</sup> In Britain, the post-92 universities are often used to refer to the former polytechnics or colleges of higher education which were given the name 'university' in 1992 (Armstrong, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> Part of the recruitment process of lecturers took place during vacation time when it was uncertain how many Chinese students would eventually turn up in the courses.

## **Student participants and their recruitment**

I always attended the lecture prior to the one which was to be recorded and taught by the same lecturer for the same module. I was allowed to make a short announcement to the students, during which I informed them of the forthcoming recording, and that they could discuss with me any concerns or disapproval. In addition, I called for the students, especially the Chinese students, to participate in the playback and discussion sessions (for the reason for recruiting non-Chinese students see the last paragraph of this section). I explained to them that my research was about classroom language and the influence of culture on Chinese students' understanding in lectures. Usually a few students would volunteer in response to my invitation. To make sure that I would obtain at least three or four participants from each lecture to conduct a group discussion, during the breaks, I talked to some students in the classroom and asked them if they would be interested. Most of the students I talked to in this way agreed to help. I marked down the contact information of all the volunteers for later arrangement of meetings. All my student participants were recruited in this way apart from those in Eric2 (see Table 3.2), i.e. the second lecture given by Eric. As Eric kindly allowed me to conduct the playback and discussion sessions during his seminars (the students in Eric2 were divided into four groups who attended four seminars taking place in succession on the same day), and all the students were encouraged to take part by him. Several of them asked to leave before the playback and discussion sessions. The sessions were then carried out with those who remained. Eric was absent throughout the process. In total, 39 Chinese students were recruited. Thirty-five of them were from Mainland China, three from Macau, and one from Hong Kong. All of them were from urban China, and the majority were in their early twenties. The method of recruitment sacrifices the possibility of controlling the

sociocultural composition of the student participants, so there are considerable diversities among my participants. For a discussion of the participants' representation of Chinese students in British universities see §3.4.3.

Initially, I intended to recruit some native British students in each lecture as a cohort to compare with the Chinese participants. However, this plan was later abandoned due to the difficulty of finding courses with adequate numbers of both cohorts of students. In the applied linguistic department, there were only two British students registered in the academic year, and neither of them attended any lessons taught by one of the lecturer participants. I therefore decided to welcome also non-British participants who, in their upbringing, had used English frequently outside of the classroom. Potential candidates included those who might be regarded as speakers of English as a second language (ESL). According to the conventional dichotomy, ESL contexts include prior British colonies and some European countries in which English proficiency is key in higher education or commerce, and English is a foreign language (EFL) when it is learnt mainly in the classroom (Cummins and Hornberger, 2008:5-6)<sup>18</sup>. I then recruited students from Cameroon, Nigeria, and India who were ESL speakers. Also, a Danish student, who spoke fluent English, was recruited considering the high involvement of English in Danish media, educational and academic contexts (cf. Lønsmann, 2009; Thøgersen, 2009). In addition, one Italian student had been living and educated in Britain for 12 years. He was also invited to my research.

The English native, ESL, Danish, and Italian students were referred to as 'informants' in

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<sup>18</sup> The boundaries between native speakers of English and ESL and EFL learners are fuzzy. None of the categories is homogeneous, and they are often criticised as products of history and demography, which do not reflect how English is used today (Nayar, 1997). Some important critiques of the conventional distinction include Kachru (1985; 1992), Nayar (1997) and Pakir (1999).

my research. Eventually eight of them were recruited, with at least one in each lecture recorded. Their accounts of the HEs could be compared with the Chinese participants' to reveal differences. Moreover, the informants provided much information which was unfamiliar to me as an EFL learner myself. By talking to them, I could avoid missing or misunderstanding important sociocultural allusions in the HEs. However, due to the practicality of the recruitment, the number of the informants was small and they were of heterogeneous backgrounds. This meant that their perceptions of humour could not be generalised. Apart from the informants, I also consulted five British colleagues and friends for their interpretations of some HEs. I shall refer to them as 'personal informants' in the analysis in Chapters 5 and 6.

### **Recording the lectures**

I decided to record only one lecture from the same module. In this respect, my method diverges from Kozlova (2008) and Nelms (2001), who recorded some modules given by the same lecturers several times over a semester. My research aimed to reveal potential problems of Chinese students' (Do they notice humour at all? What do they notice?) with minimal interference of the researcher. Repeating the research procedures with the same group of participants will surely change the way they perceive humour in the later stage. Therefore I decided not to record more than one lecture from the same module, or conduct more than one playback and discussion session with the same students.

Nine lectures were audio recorded. Video recording was initially considered, as videos of the lectures would benefit my analysis of humour, and stimulate the students' memory in the playback and discussion sessions. However, I was concerned with the intrusion that it would cause. Although Nelms (2001) and Kozlova (2008), who video recorded the lectures

in their studies, both believed that the impacts were minimum, their methodological approach differed from mine. They conducted multiple filming of the same participants over a period of time. This meant that their participants had time to get used to the filming. My research, as explained in the prior paragraph, recorded one group of participants only once, so that the researcher's reflexive influence on the data should be minimised. There are signs of such impacts in BASE, in which the lecturers often crack jokes referring to the camera. In fact, to mitigate the intrusion of her filming, Nelms (2001) positioned her camera at the back of the classrooms, although she admitted that the detailed facial features were sacrificed in this way (ibid.:50). There are more problems concerning the number of cameras if the audience are to be filmed. When there is a large audience, e.g. there were over 300 students in one of the lectures I recorded, and over 100 in another one, one camera is not enough. But more cameras cause yet more intrusion. As a result, I decided to apply audio recording instead, which is less intrusive than video cameras although it is not problem-free. For a detailed review of the pros and cons of audio and video recordings see Swann (2001).

At the beginning of each lecture, I reminded the students of the recording, and confirmed that everyone approved of it. Two digital recorders were used in each lecture. One was a Sony SX78 Digital Voice Recorder, and was carried by the lecturer in his/her pocket throughout the recording. An external microphone plugged into the recorder was clipped to the lecturer's lapels. The other was a Zoom H2 Handy Recorder. This was placed in the middle of the classroom. Both recorders were turned on a little while before the lecture started, and were not touched until after it ended. I always sat behind the audience, and concentrated on making notes. My notes recorded brief information of what I perceived to be instances of humour. Such information included key words of what was said, the



lecturer's facial expressions and body movements, reference to the PowerPoint presentation or handouts, and the students' reactions. These notes partly compensated for the shortcomings of audio recording, but were inadequate for in-depth paralinguistic analysis. In total, 12 hours and 50 minutes of lectures were recorded. Some of the lectures were divided into two parts. Table 3.2 is an outline of them.

<b>Code (Lecturer +no.)</b>	<b>Module</b>	<b>No. of ss.</b>	<b>Student level</b>	<b>Lecture title</b>	<b>Part</b>	<b>Length hh:mm</b>
<b>Andy1</b>	Applied linguistics	20+	MA <sup>i</sup>	Writing	1	00:57
					2	00:38
<b>Andy2</b>	Spoken English	30	MA	Conversation analysis		00:54
<b>Amy1</b>	Psychology of language classroom practices	100	MA	Autonomy & motivation	1	00:46
					2	00:47
<b>John1</b>	Introduction to ELT	60	MA	Speaking	1	00:54
					2	00:42
<b>Deep1</b>	Asian Business & Global Challenge	28	PG <sup>ii</sup>	Business systems of Japan, Korea and Overseas Chinese networks	1	01:09
					2	01:02
<b>Eric1</b>	International Business	14	UG <sup>iii</sup>	Culture: its influence on business		00:53
<b>Eric2</b>	International	300	UG	Eclectic theory		00:47

Code (Lecturer +no.)	Module	No. of ss.	Student level	Lecture title	Part	Length hh:mm
	Business			& critique of diamond theory		
Lynn1	Marketing	48	MBA <sup>iv</sup> , MSc <sup>v</sup>		1	01:11
	Communication				2	00:53
Paul1	International Marketing	12	MBA, MSc			01:12

Table 3.2. Lectures recorded in the Small Corpus

<sup>i</sup>MA- Master; <sup>ii</sup>PG- postgraduate; <sup>iii</sup>UG- undergraduate; <sup>iv</sup>MBA- Master of Business Administration; <sup>v</sup>MSc- Master of science

### Identifying and transcribing HEs; selecting extracts

Drawing upon the knowledge accumulated in §3.2.2-3, and adopting the segmenting method developed during the analysis as documented in §3.4.2, I located 119 HEs with audience laughter in the nine lectures. The laughter signalled that the audience recognised the utterances as humorous. There were two significant advantages working with my own data. Firstly, since I attended the lectures and communicated with the lecturers and some of the students, much more contextual knowledge was obtained. Also, the on-site notes recorded paralinguistic features and events that the audio recorders could not pick up, e.g. latecomers entering the classroom. These notes, together with my contextual knowledge, helped me to identify humour as if I had been an insider.

As explained in §3.2.2, humour not greeted with laughter or other overt responses is not necessarily failed as responses are not always expected. One of the lecturer participants, Andy, enjoyed saying things in a lecture that occurred to him on the spur of the moment. He commented on one such occasion:

I am encountering something [...] finding it amusing and going off on a sort of riff to myself [...] some students might pick up on that, most of them they will just ignore it

In this sense, lack of response was expected. Moreover, humour can function interpersonally even if the hearer is not amused by it - some of my student participants appreciated the lecturer's efforts of rapport building through telling stories, despite thinking that the stories were not funny. Humour in such instances was scarcely responded to, but it successfully performed certain interactional functions.

I also identified HEs without laughter in the nine lectures. The identification was based on my considerations of the lecturers' contextualisation cues (§3.2.2), discoursal features, and my contextual knowledge. In the lectures, I noticed and marked down quite a few cues of humour which did not generate audible responses from the students. When listening to the audio recordings of the lectures, more cues of this kind were noticed. Afterwards each recognised cue was bookmarked using the transcribing software Express Scribe, and a duration of about five minutes of the recording was transcribed surrounding the cues. The transcripts included the contextualisation cues and other contextual information that were deemed relevant to the understanding of the utterance. Changes of accents, as a potential cue of humour, were signalled but not represented using 'eye dialect' (cf. Swann, 2001) or any other possible means, since I did not investigate the phonetic features. Discernible pauses between words were transcribed to show the speaker's separation of utterances. Minimum punctuation was used to avoid impressionistic analysis of the utterance. The recordings and transcripts were reviewed repeatedly to decide the boundaries and segmentation of one or more HEs (see §3.4.2). As a result, 52 HEs were identified which were not greeted with laughter in the lectures.

In total 171 HEs were identified in the nine lectures I recorded. Transcriptions of these,

together with the audio recordings, were named ‘the Small Corpus’ (as compared to the BASE corpus). After the HEs were identified, 17 of them were selected to be used in the playback and discussion sessions with the student participants and interviews with the lecturers. The criteria of selection derived from the analysis of the HEs in BASE and the Small Corpus (for detailed discussions see Chapters 4 and 5; for a summarising account see the introduction of Chapter 6) and are listed below. Whenever possible, a playback and discussion session would include HEs which embrace the following characters:

- HEs that manifest the lecturer’s lecturing style;
- HEs that are in the forms of stories, anecdotes or quips;
- Teasing and self-deprecating humour which may be difficult for Chinese students;
- Humour expressing social values which may be difficult for Chinese students.

### **Audio playback and answering respondent’s report form (students)**

Eleven playback and discussion sessions, each including audio playback of some HEs selected by me, the students’ answering the respondent’s report (RR) form (Appendix 3), interviews, and/or group discussions, were held within between four and fifteen days after a recorded lecture. Table 3.3 is a summary of these 11 playback and discussion sessions. Each student participant participated in only one playback and discussion session (see ‘recording the lectures’ above in this section). The participants in Groups A, B and C had attended more than one of the lectures recorded. The playback and discussion sessions all took place in pre-booked classrooms. The participants were first asked to read and sign a respondents’ consent form (Appendix 2). After that, each of them was handed a RR form (Appendix 3), and were asked to fill in the information required. Afterwards, I explained to them what they needed to do with the RR form. At this point, I revealed to them that one of

my research foci was humour in lectures, and stressed that I did not have a standard definition of humour; they should tell me whatever they considered to be humour; there were no right or wrong answers to my questions. I also explained that an instance of humour was not necessarily funny or amusing, i.e. making people laugh. Finally they were asked if they had any questions. I usually gave the above information in Chinese (for a discussion of translation of 'humour' in Chinese see §2.2.2). However, the participants in Groups B and C (see Table 3.3) insisted that English should be used throughout the playback and discussion session, so I spoke English instead, and switched to Chinese if they showed any signs of confusion.

The selected HEs were played one by one to the participants. Considering the time limit, I decided to play maximally three HEs from each lecture recorded. In total, the audio extracts of 17 HEs covering the four characters listed above were played in the sessions.

After each extract, they were asked to write down their answers on the form individually in either Chinese or English. Their completed forms were collected before playing the next audio extract, and they would be given a new form. The questions on the RR forms were mainly designed to elicit the participants' accounts of humour. But the first question - 'please briefly summarise what the lecturer said in the audio extract' - also served to assess how well the participants comprehended the audio extract. For more discussion on the students' language problems of understanding humour please see §3.4.4.

Group	Data types	Lecture(s) covered	Number of participants
A	RR/GD <sup>ii</sup> /IN <sup>iii</sup>	Andy1, Amy1	3
B	RR/GD/IN	Andy2, Amy1, John1	6

Group	Data types	Lecture(s) covered	Number of participants
C	RR/GD/IN	Andy2, Amy1, John1	5
D	RR/IN	Deep1 <sup>19</sup>	2
E	RR/IN	Deep1	1
F	RR/GD/IN	Eric1	6
G	RR/GD/IN	Eric2	4
H	RR/GD/IN	Eric2	3 (one participant's RR forms went missing)
I	RR/GD/IN	Eric2	2
J	RR/GD/IN	Eric2	5
K	RR/IN	Lynn1	2

Table 3.3. Playback and discussion sessions with students

<sup>i</sup>RR - Independent completion of RR forms; <sup>ii</sup>GD - Group discussion; <sup>iii</sup>IN - Interview

### Interviews/group discussions with students

After the playback and completion of RR forms, the participants were interviewed. If there were more than two participants, before the interviews they discussed as a group with each other their answers on the RR forms. Their forms were therefore handed back to them as a reminder of their answers, but they were asked not to change anything that they had written on the forms. The interviews and group discussions were audio recorded. I was usually present at the group discussions, but when multiple groups had simultaneous discussions (i.e. Groups B and C; Groups G, H, I, and J), I spent time with each group in turn, meaning that the other groups would be recorded talking in my absence. The group discussions were close to the format of focus group discussions. Focus groups are a type of qualitative

<sup>19</sup> No HEs were identified in Deep's lecture. However, he laughed slightly at several points as he was speaking, I played the extracts including the laugh to the three Chinese participants (Groups D and E). They did not recognise any of them to be instances of humour.

research method in which individuals with similar characteristics or common experiences are asked to discuss certain topics; the discussion is moderated by the interviewer(s) (Hatch, 2002:24). The moderator should avoid too much control over the participants' interaction, as this damages its naturalistic development (Myers, 1998, 2007) (for further comparison between interviews and focus groups see §3.3.4). However, as will be shown in Chapter 6, often the participants did not notice any instances of humour, and sometimes I would give them some 'clues' (see the student data of Extract 5 in §6.2.2). In this respect, the group discussions deviated from focus groups. During the talks, I asked the participants to discuss some questions regarding some specific aspects of humour in the HEs. These questions stressed the prominent characters of humour identified in the analysis of BASE (see Chapter 4). The method of asking the specific questions facilitated the research in the way that the participants talked about what was of interest to me. But they might not represent the participants' interest. For further methodological discussion of this method see §3.3.4.

### **Audio playback and interviews with lecturers**

The seven lecturer participants in my research also listened to audio playback of some HEs and were interviewed individually. They were played the same audio extracts as those that were played to the student participants, and were asked to comment if they noticed any humour in the audio extracts, and describe what the humour was. They were told that they could pause the tape at any time to make comments, and were presented with a cue card (Appendix 4) with some questions on which they could base their comments.

### **3.3.3. Data analysis**

The HEs in the Small Corpus were analysed originally applying the analytical framework

developed in stage 1. Properties of humour in them were coded following the process as described in §3.2.3. New recurrent properties that did not emerge in the BASE data were also noted down, which were eventually added to the analytical framework (§7.1.2). In addition to the analysis of the discourse data, the students' and lecturers' accounts of humour were also obtained. These three sets of data were compared to identify any discrepancies (for further discussion of the data triangulation see §3.3.4).

### **3.3.4. Methodological issues**

#### **Post-lecture perceptions of humour**

Asking students to describe humour in lectures which they had attended better guaranteed that they had adequate knowledge of the context. However, the effects of the timing and re-listening to extracts from lectures meant that the participants were actually recalling and reconstructing their perceptions. Therefore the data could not represent their live perceptions of humour in class. One possible solution was to ask the students to note down humour live in class, but the disadvantage is that this might distract them from listening and learning. One may also suggest arranging for a lecture where the audience make on-site notes of humour. However, this will damage the naturalistic nature of the data which I regard as significant for studying spontaneous humour. Thus I consider the current design the best option despite the compromises involved. Nonetheless, throughout the research I would always be aware of what my data actually represented.

#### **The researcher's role in preparing the specific questions for the playback and discussion sessions**

I have explained in §3.3.2 that, in the interviews and group discussions, I asked the



Chinese participants some specific questions prepared by me regarding humour in the HEs. By doing so, I made sure that the participants talked about what was of interest to my research. But they might not reflect what was salient to the participants in the HEs. This approach was considered necessary because of the complexity of humour. Below is an extract I played in the session. It is followed by some students' comments:

1     Andy: I mean, these are just things I got very quickly and if you combine them you  
 2           get a massively rich set of potential ways of giving feedback, so, what I ask you to  
 3           do was of course completely unfair, I gave you a text and said mark it and nobody  
 4           was going to sit there and say no, so you had to do it, and of course what we've  
 5           learned through research is that really you need to use your options, and this is from  
 6           Furneaux et al.'s research, some feedback options, "the teacher could be an initiator  
 7           a supporter an adviser a suggester a provider and a mutator", changer, I like the  
 8           mutator, I don't know if I ever mutated a student in my life but you know I am  
 9           prepared to try it so there you go so what's happened in terms of writing research is  
 10          that, feedback has become embodied in the process and the teacher's role has been  
 11          rethought in all sorts of ways students have been much involved in that by the way  
 12          the website is okay now I checked it all out and today this week's lecture is already  
 13          up on it

Andy1-HE44

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**Participants/ What was humorous? (accounts on RR forms and from group discussions)**  
**informants**

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**Ping**           He says he has never done that in his whole life, which is an **exaggeration**<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> My bold.

He must have done it [... or], he is not dead, he is likely to do it in the future

- Julia** What I found funny in it when he said urm he condemned the strategy. He said he's very sorry that he used that strategy. You know, he asked us to mark the scripts and then he came back and said he's sorry that he did the very wrong thing, whereas that's the means he needs to use to find out how teachers mark their scripts so for him to say that he was that he did it. **He wasn't really sorry.**
- Mike** [It was] humour there [...] in announcing the word mutator. The way he pronounces I'm a it's a mutator

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Table 3.4. Sample of participants'/informants' accounts of humour

What the three students saw as humour were very different. Ping thought that Andy had made an exaggerated statement about his life. Mike thought the pronunciation of 'mutator' was funny. Julia somehow noticed humour in a different place - she remarked that Andy did not mean it when he apologised. All the different aspects raised have played a part in the humour, and are not mutually exclusive. In fact, if we like, we can add more points to the list. This creates big challenges for the data analysis, which tends to seek patterns. One approach to deal with this problem is to collect as many aspects of humour raised by the participants as possible, and categorise them as Frymier and her colleagues (Frymier et al., 2008; Wanzer et al., 2006) do, but this approach is somewhat reductionist, and does not reflect the complexity of humour as a fusion of various aspects (see more discussion of these authors' work see §2.3.4). Another approach is to ask the participants to comment on specific aspects of the humour. In the case of the above extract by Andy, I can ask the participants to talk about why Andy commented on 'mutator', and what he meant by it.

This second approach relies on the researcher's judgement to prepare the specific questions, and hence is at yet more risk of bias. Humour studies are prone to subjectivity in the identification and interpretation of humour, and researchers cannot shy away from that fact.

Holmes (2000) confronts this issue and stresses the analyst's role in identifying and interpreting humour. In the current study, I argue that the researcher's judgement is particularly important for recognising, among the immense aspects of humour, those that are most likely to affect Chinese students' comprehension in lectures. The researcher thus makes hypotheses and tests them in the playback and discussion sessions. In this respect, my introspective knowledge and perceptions of humour as a Chinese student in Britain become advantages.

### **Insufficient resources for sociocultural comparisons**

Due to practical restrictions, I had to recruit the student participants after the lecturers had agreed to participate in my research. As a result, it was very difficult to control the sociocultural composition of the student participants. The 39 Chinese participants come from very different regions in China and are inevitably diverse in many aspects of their backgrounds. Furthermore, my data is small (less than 13 hours of lecture recording; seven lecturers; 39 Chinese students). Based on these two considerations, there is a need for caution in generalising from any findings arising from the current study, or making any sociocultural comparisons between the students. This will inevitably restrict the contribution this study can make to knowledge of humour in general.

### **The triangulation and its limitations**

In stage 2, I intended to combine three perspectives and four types of accounts of humour in lectures as shown in Figure 3.2. Participant observations, interviews and focus groups are often combined in social research (Kitzinger, 1995; Myers, 1998). My combination of methods followed such a convention. After the audio playback of each selected HE, I chose to let the students write down their answers instead of interviewing them individually. My

method has some advantages. In the first place, it saved time interviewing individual students. Secondly, the Chinese students might feel embarrassed and intimidated being interviewed with their understanding of lectures in English, so writing down their answers could partly mitigate this issue. Finally, the students were given more time organising their thoughts before they presented their answers.

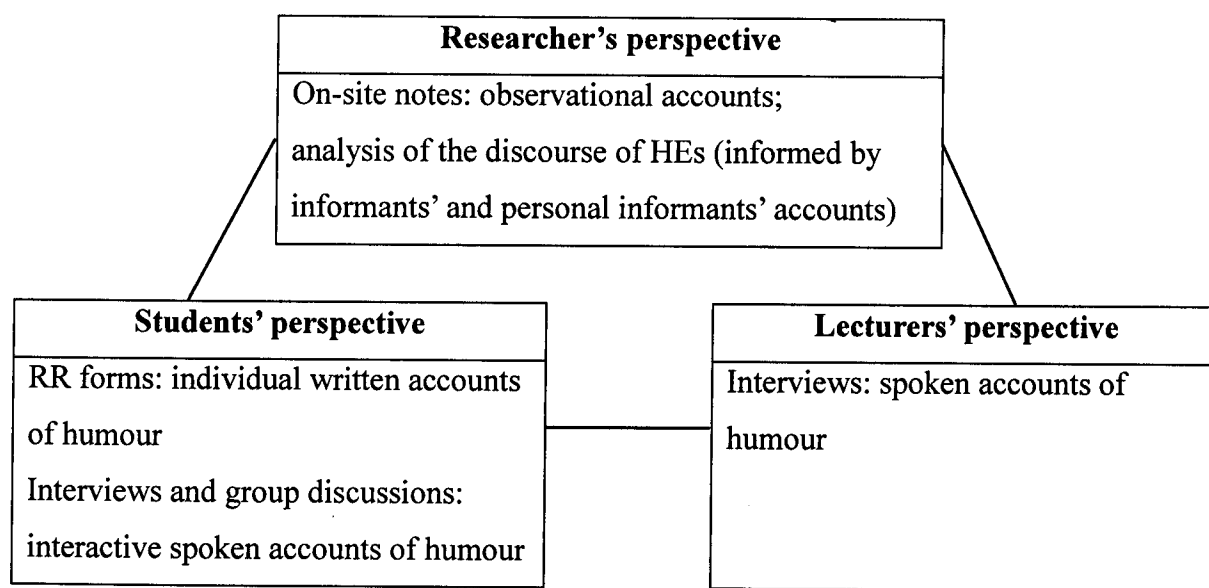


Figure 3.2 Triangulation in stage 2

Compared to participant observation and interviews, by allowing the participants to interact freely, the group discussions shared the advantages of focus groups, which can generate far more data in the same period of time, and the data can capture the dynamic construction of and movement between opinions (cf. Hatch, 2002; Kitzinger, 1995; Morgan, 1997). Nevertheless, scholars of focus groups such as Myers (1998, 2007) stress that too much control of the moderator may damage the naturalistic development of the interaction, but meanwhile admit that it is difficult to judge how much control is suitable. I was cautious about my reflexive influence in the playback and discussion sessions, and only interfered when the discussion had digressed too much from the researched topic, or when the participants did not notice any humour and consequently showed no interest in talking about one HE. Another inevitable issue of the group discussion was that there was

an imbalance between individual participant's contributions to the discussion as some tended to dominate and overshadow others' opinions (cf. Cook et al., 2009; Kitzinger, 1995; Myers, 2007).

These several methods provide different versions of perceptions of humour in lectures by both parties involved (lecturers and students). Nonetheless, each version contains limitations in terms of revealing participants' motivations and beliefs. The combination of these methods does not eliminate these limitations and turn the data into some sort of representation of reality. In fact, no research method can achieve this perfection (Cook et al., 2004; Cook et al., 2006). The purpose of the triangulation is to extend the researcher's knowledge of possible opinions of humour, and partly reduce the risk of the researcher's bias.

### **3.4 Methodological discussion on the overall research design**

#### **3.4.1. The triangulation of two sets of corpora data**

In this research, data from two corpora, BASE and the Small Corpus recorded by myself, were triangulated to study forms and functions of humour in British academic lectures. With its 1.6 million-word holdings, the former corpus has an evident advantage for my research. However, as I discussed in §3.2.4, BASE also contains inherent limitations in respect of its transcriptions and contextual information. As the analyst was absent from the lectures, the interpretation of discoursal meanings has to rely on the transcripts, and the risk of erroneous interpretations cannot be efficiently lessened by simply having multiple coders. Therefore, I decided to record new lectures and use the new data to test the findings derived from BASE. In this sense, the Small Corpus data allows analysis in some ways that cannot be carried out with the BASE data.

In return, the BASE data prepared the work on the Small Corpus in terms of the identification and coding of HEs. It allowed me to analyse humour in the nine lectures effectively in a comparatively short period of time before the playback and discussion sessions. Moreover, The analysis of the BASE data revealed some significant properties of humour, and enabled me to develop good knowledge of the potential forms and functions of humour in the lectures. This knowledge informed the selection of HEs to be used, and the specific questions to be asked in the playback and discussion sessions.

### **3.4.2. Defining humour episodes**

HEs are data extracted from the on-going lectures, and are supposed to represent humour in the data analysis. The connection between humour and HEs is of course problematic. First of all, HEs are recorded in the formats of texts, videos and audios. Each of these formats is inadequate to capture discursive humour, and even a combination of them cannot reflect its complexity. Then there is the difficulty of defining boundaries of HEs, a question concerning when humour is perceived to start and end. Some examples of humour, especially those involving stories or anecdotes, are self-contained, and display relatively clear boundaries with the surrounding discourse. In fact, stories are constantly ‘canned’ and recycled, hence what Attardo (2001) calls canned jokes. However, stories and anecdotes are not context-free. They express the story-teller’s stance toward something in question (Labov, 1972). According to Labov’s model of narrative, the story-teller’s evaluative discourse that is external to the flow of the story shows why the story matters to the current context, and is therefore part of the narrative. In my study, a humour-related story or anecdote, together with relevant evaluative discourse, is regarded as an HE. For example in Extract 1 (see §5.2.1 or Appendix 5), Amy tells a story about a multi-lingual speaker between lines 11 and 17. This, together with evaluation at both ends, forms one HE.

Humour is often so closely bound to context - which includes, among many other aspects, the on-going discourse - that it is impossible to extract it without sacrificing, partly or wholly, the humorous effect. This was pointed out by some of the student participants in the playback and discussion sessions, who perceived humour in the audio extracts, but did not feel it to be as funny as in the actual lecture. The current study compromises the humorous effect that the HEs are likely to have on the participants. This means that the participants may not feel as impressed by the humour played back to them in the playback and discussion sessions as in the actual lectures. Allowing this compromise, how much discourse an HE should include was decided taking into account the considerations below.

Firstly, HEs in both BASE and the Small Corpus should be comprehensible to potential readers of this thesis with brief contextual information provided. In the Small Corpus, if an HE was to be used in a playback and discussion session, it should be comprehensible to the participants. Some brief contextual information concerning the time locus of the episode, and what the lecturer had been talking about, would be given to them in the playback and discussion sessions when necessary. Meanwhile, certain adjustments needed to be made. For examples, an HE used in a playback and discussion session should not stop at the punchline, so humour was not structurally flagged up by the researcher. The above consideration did not apply to the BASE data, since it was not played to the participants.

Secondly, Bateson (1953) puts forward the notion of play frame that conversationalists can frame and signal their talk as play and hence not serious. If a lapse of a play frame was signalled with discourse markers (*I mean, well, there you go, anyway, etc.*) or paralinguistically signalled by the lecturer, and the sketch of discourse could satisfy the first condition as explained above, it was regarded as one HE. Otherwise, more discourse was added until it met the condition. For example, the extract below from BASE happens

at the beginning of the lecture.

1 Lps40: for foreign students, and also to see what idiosyncrasies lecturers have, so,

2 right so

3 SS: <laughter>

4 Lps40: let's go

(pslct040)

The lecturer above is referring to the filming of the lecture as the lesson starts, and signals the end of the play frame by saying 'right so ... let's go'. What he says between the two points is clearly comprehensible by itself. As such, this extract is seen as one HE. However, in Andy's example in §3.3.4, his change of accent when saying 'mutator' starts the play frame (line 7), which then ends as he utters 'so there you go' (line 9). The utterance concerned is very brief and cannot be understood easily in its own, so more preceding discourse (lines 1-6) is included. This discourse shows that Andy is reading a PowerPoint slide. In addition, the last several lines (after 'there you go' in line 9) are included to avoid the influence of punchline on perceiving humour.

Initially, successive cues of humour were seen to be in one episode, and would only be divided if there is a shift of topic or change of class events (§5.1.1). However, problems arose in Andy's lectures in the Small Corpus following this approach. As introduced in §5.1.1, humour is his norm of lecturing. If the above approach is adopted to segment his HEs, Andy's lectures will end up containing a small number of very long HEs. This creates a somewhat false impression of Andy's humour, and does not reflect the interactive characteristic of his lecturing style. Spontaneous humour that is rich in forms and functions often arises in his interactions with the students. With this account, I undertook further reviews of Andy's data attempting to divide the successive cues of humour into some



shorter episodes. The segmentation was then based on the direct audience that Andy was addressing. One example is Extract 7 (see §5.3.4 or Appendix 5). The five episodes happened continuously with no gaps in between. The first four episodes (HE23-26) were identified as a different student proposed an interesting way of telling the bad news, to which Andy responded and created more laughter. The last episode (HE27) was Andy's final resolution.

Below is another example by Andy. These three episodes were separated because Andy was moving to different positions in the classroom to give out handouts, and as he spoke, his direct audience was different.

- 1 Andy: <gives out handouts> It's okay I will come up to the back you get personal deliveries  
2 at the back  
3 SS: <laughter>

Andy1-HE06

- 1 Andy: <gives out handouts> I have personal delivery personal deliv- Oh hu uhh hu uhh sorry  
2 about that, excuse me when I break my neck, my fault not yours

Andy1- HE07

- 1 Andy: <gives out handouts> and there we go there we go oh dear missed them again  
2 <laughter> there you are oh now oh wee wer marvellous thank you, spares, spare  
3 copies for sale for those who need them right

Andy1-HE08

### **3.4.3. Defining Chinese students in British universities**

Some conceptual and methodological issues arise in relation to defining and representing 'Chinese students in British universities'. If the subjects of the study can be satisfactorily defined, and problems are discovered regarding their perceptions of humour in lectures,

one may question whether these problems are unique to Chinese students, or are actually general problems of international students. In the section I will discuss these issues.

My research subjects are assumed to be of Chinese nationality. The nationality of a group tells us little about their characters as individuals despite popular belief in national characteristics. Domestically, China is often depicted as a united and harmonious nation, with equality across the 56 ethnic groups. Of the 1.3 billion population, 91.5% are ethnically Han (NBS, 2002), sometimes considered to be 'the great homogeneous mass of the Chinese people, sharing the same culture, the same traditions, and the same written language' (the Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2012). However, the sheer size (3.7 million sq mi) and population of China (ibid.) mean that it is immensely difficult to identify uniformity across the Chinese people. The Chinese population is highly diverse in terms of

- Regional difference - there are geographical, political and economical differences between the 22 administrative provinces (ibid.); differences between urban and rural areas, and eastern coast and western inland are also immense (BBC, 2011);
- Generation - there are significant gaps between people who experienced the Cultural Revolution in the 60s/70s, and those who were born after the start of the economic reform in late 70s; in addition, there are often confrontational arguments on the Internet among the so-called generations of post-70, post-80, and post-90.
- Language - the Han people speak a number of dialects falling into two main groups, although Mandarin, or Putonghua, is the standard dialect used by the majority of the population; the ethnic minorities use over 80 to 120 languages (Lam, 2008:406);
- Economic position - the urban population take up 47% of the total population (CIA, 2011); the economic disparity between urban and the rural areas is among the largest in the world (BBC, 2011), and keeps rising in recent years (Fu, 2010).

- Religion - religion is an ambiguous concept in China. Although most Chinese people consider themselves to be atheists, there are substantial traces of religious belief in daily life. On the one hand, Confucianism, as the centre of Chinese traditional values, has been described as having the characteristics of a religion (Yang, 2007), and was heavily criticised during the Cultural Revolution, but has celebrated recent revival (ibid.); on the other hand, despite the government's tight control over religious activities, there is evidence of increase of religious believers in China: a survey in 2007 suggested that at least 300 million Chinese people considered themselves to be believers in one of the four religions: Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity and Islam (Wu, 2007).

Coming back to my research subjects: they are Chinese citizens who travel to the U.K. for studies at undergraduate or postgraduate levels. The number of such students has been increasing in the recent decade, and was estimated to be over 85,000 in 2009 (British Council, 2011). Careful discussion is needed on how homogeneous these people are. Official and academic statistics regarding overseas Chinese students are very limited inside China (some recent academic studies include Liu (2008) and Zhu (2008)). A few Chinese researchers have conducted relevant studies in the U.K. (Jin, 1992; Jin and Cortazzi, 2006; Xu, 2003). Nevertheless, these studies, together with other official and institutional sources, provide little or no information regarding overseas Chinese students' region of origin or religion. As for their economic positions, two studies of Chinese students in the U.K., Jin and Cortazzi (2006) and Xu (2003), both point out that they tend to come from well-off families in urban China. However, these authors only supply either anecdotal or implicit evidence of this claim. Xu (2003) interviewed 144 Chinese undergraduate students in 15 British universities in 2003, and found that most of them were from coastal cities. Also, the

most common occupations of these students' fathers included owners of private companies, executives of state-owned enterprises, and local government officials. A strong but somewhat indirect evidence of the financial status of Chinese students in Britain may be that, in recent decade, the majority of Chinese students studying overseas are self-funded<sup>21</sup> - according to the British Council, tuition fees for non-EU international students in British universities range from £6,250 to £20,000 per year (British Council, 2002), whereas in China, the urban per capita income is 17,175 yuan (£1,717) in 2009, and 5,153 yuan (£515) in the countryside (Fu, 2010). Some of the above-mentioned literature also reveal that the majority of overseas Chinese students are in their twenties (Xu, 2003; Zhu, 2008).

In summary, the available sources of information depict a certain level of homogeneity among Chinese students studying overseas - they are mostly young educated people (20-30 years old; have gained or are pursuing at least one university degree) from comparatively well-off families in urban China. Moreover, education is compulsory in China between ages 6 to 15, and curriculums and textbooks are highly centralised and standardised by the Ministry of Education. This means that overseas Chinese students are likely to have very similar experience of compulsory education. Despite the similarities, the over 80 thousand Chinese students in the U.K. are bound to be heterogeneous in many ways. Jin and Cortazzi (2006) propose a distinction between two types of Chinese students according to their academic performances. The first type refers to those who achieve good grades in the Chinese university admission exam, and choose to study in top-ranking universities in the U.K. The second type of Chinese students emerges along with the recent rapid expansion of higher education in China. According to the authors, the expansion has generated

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<sup>21</sup> According to the Minister of Department of International Cooperation and Exchanges, Ministry of Education in an interview in 2010, the percentage of self-funded overseas Chinese students is 91.6% (Sina Education, 2010).

immense demand for higher education, which the state-run universities have failed to accommodate. To meet the demand, many universities have set up subsidiary campuses and accepted students who do not meet the normal admission requirements for higher tuition fees. Meanwhile, many Sino-UK cooperative programs have emerged attracting many Chinese students from the subsidiary campuses to completing part of their courses in a British university (cf. Zhou and Todman, 2008). These students are regarded to be of a lower academic rank, and their English proficiency is usually lower (Jin and Cortazzi, 2006).

Jin and Cortazzi (*ibid.*) claim that these two types of Chinese students encompass different academic cultures, and their different needs should be addressed in British universities. In addition, Zhou and Todman (2008) point out that, students enrolled on the collaborative programs usually come to the U.K. in groups, and are more likely to socialise mainly with Chinese students. These characteristics, according to the students researched, have negative impacts on their improvement of language proficiency and learning of local culture (*ibid.*:232). When designing the research methods of the study, I took Jin and Cortazzi's distinction into consideration. However, it needs to be treated cautiously to avoid stereotyping students who came under Sino-UK programs. I collected data from two university departments in England. One was an applied linguistic department in a Russell Group university (see footnote 15 in §3.3.2). All of their master's degree students applied for the course individually, and were required to have IELTS results of 6.5 or equivalent. The other location of data collection was a business school of a Post-92 university (see footnote 15 in §3.3.2), which had set up collaborative programs with several Chinese universities, and enrolled a large number of Chinese undergraduate and postgraduate students. Their undergraduate courses required IELTS results of 5.0, and the master's

courses results of 6.0.

In total 39 Chinese students, who were all volunteers, took part in my research. They were asked to provide information including name, age, duration of their stay in Britain up to the point of the research, and the level and name of their courses. They were also asked where they had lived and studied in China in the interviews and casual conversations with the researcher. As expected, all of them were from cities, and the majority of them were in their early twenties. However, as explained in §3.3.4 ('insufficient resources for sociocultural comparisons'), the method of recruitment sacrifices the possibility of controlling the sociocultural composition of the student participants, and there are still considerable diversities among them. For example, two participants were in their early thirties, and another one was just over forty. They all had working experience in China. Moreover, the 39 participants come from different parts of China, and speak different 'dialects', as they are called domestically, apart from Mandarin. Four participants are from Macau or Hong Kong, two special administrative regions of China which were colonies of Portugal and Britain respectively for over a century. After their return to China in the late 90s, they continue to differ distinctively from the Mainland in their economic and political systems, education, culture, and official languages.

The insufficient control over the sociocultural variables of these participants gives rise to a methodological issue - the small number of Chinese students in my research do not adequately represent the 80 thousand Chinese students in the U.K. To address this issue, I propose that this is an indicative study aiming to identify and illustrate potential humour-related problems. It does not aim to develop an extensive collection of problems, and map them with various types of Chinese students in the U.K. The complexity of humour does not lend itself to large scale quantitative investigation. The study focuses, in depth, on the

accounts of humour provided by the 39 Chinese participants. The detailed analysis of a small number of subjects facilitates extensive enquiries over this complex topic. However, I need to be cautious about generalising any findings arising from the current study, or performing any sociocultural comparisons between the students and lecturers.

Another issue may be raised questioning whether any humour-related problems noticed in the study are exclusively Chinese, or are common among all international students. Indeed, some problems the Chinese participants have of comprehending humour, as shown in Chapter 6, are likely to be shared by other non-native students. In the fieldwork, I talked to a small number of non-Chinese international students and asked them to account for humour in the audio extracts. They are from Kazakhstan, Syria, Korea, France, and Jordan. There was evidence that some French students did not perceive humour in Eric's self-deprecation, e.g. Extract 4 in §5.3.1 (also see Appendix 5), but the small number of the non-Chinese international students made it impossible to make systematic comparisons across nations<sup>22</sup>.

The fact that potential problems identified in this study are not unique to Chinese students may be seen as undermining the Chinese focus of the research. To address this issue, I argue that the focus on Chinese students of this study reflects not only the identity of the participants, but also that of the researcher - I am from urban China, was educated there to undergraduate level, and have been a student in Britain for over five years; I still encounter many of the problems that my participants had. As such, my analysis is conducted from a somewhat insider's perspective, and I can provide relevant sociocultural materials to explain the participants' problems.

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<sup>22</sup> I decided to exclude the data of the non-Chinese international students from my research because there were too few of them, and they are from many different countries.

### **3.4.4. Distinguishing language and cultural problems**

The hypothesis of my study is that Chinese students in British universities experience problems of humour comprehension in their lectures. Two general causes of the problems which one may suggest are insufficient English proficiency and cultural difference. Traditionally, language proficiency is considered to include vocabulary, phonology and grammar of the language (Edwards et al., 2007), and language problems are often considered to be evident in communication between people from different countries who speak different languages. Nevertheless, speaking the same language does not guarantee good understanding between people from different countries, hence the ironic remark, attributed to George Bernard Shaw, that ‘England and America are two countries separated by the same language’ alluding to the cultural difference between the two peoples. The concept of culture in daily life has almost become ‘synonymous with the way of life and everyday behaviours of members of speech communities’ (Kramsch, 2006:322), although academic discussions of it have always been controversial and diversified. In daily and casual discourse, language and culture are often mentioned as if they were two separate ingredients of communication. In fact, they are so closely intertwined that it is impossible to discretely account for their independent influences. To give an extreme example, language may be considered to be the sole problem in an extreme case when two people, who do not speak each other’s language at all, are on the phone. But in most cases, language and culture cannot be easily separated. Phonology, for example, is the basic element of language, whereas phonological and phonetic variations, i.e. accents, bear rich information of the speaker’s geographical and social origin, and it may be interpreted very differently even by people of the same sociocultural or linguistic origin. Moreover, language and culture have mutual impacts. An increasing proficiency in language tends to



bring cultural closeness to the people who speak it, but there are also instances of people becoming less sympathetic to a particular culture as they find out more about it, e.g. an Israeli who speaks good Arabic is not necessarily sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, nor is a Palestinian who speaks good Hebrew necessarily pro-Israeli. Interest in a certain culture produces strong motivation for learning the language used in the culture; however, people also learn a language in order to export their culture to one that is considered to be inferior, e.g. in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Christian missionaries from Western countries learned Chinese in order to export their values to what they perceived to be an uncivilised culture.

My discussion up to this point has not been rigorous - firstly, it is based on a traditional and widely-rejected view of what counts as knowledge of a language, i.e. vocabulary, phonetics, phonology and grammar; secondly, I have not yet defined culture. On the first problem, prevailing theories of language teaching advocate fostering communicative competence (Hymes, 1972), which stresses the ability to use appropriate language in various contexts. This ability surely involves knowledge of cultural norms and values. However, there are also emerging claims in intercultural communication that English used as an international language can be neutral and culture-free (for examples of such claims see House (2002; 2003)). The current study takes the stance that knowledge of language entails culture. As for defining culture, it is a notoriously difficult task (for a brief review of a compilation of definitions of culture see Spencer-Oatey (2009); for reviews of definitions with a focus on language teaching see Atkinson (1999) and Kramsch (2006)). The current study adopts the post-modernist conception of culture in language teaching, which centres on two notions: culture is discourse - every utterance is power-embedded, culture is the embodied history of language, and history is constantly renegotiated through language; culture is identity -

culture reflects how a member of a community understands his/her relationship to the other members throughout history and in the future (Kramsch, 2006:325).

In language teaching and learning, language and culture are often separated for the sake of assessment. The essential contents of a culture are difficult to identify, and there are severe controversies over the political implications of teaching the 'authentic' culture of a target language (cf. Cook, 2010; Seidlhofer, 2011). In contrast, the vocabulary, phonetics and grammar of a language are seemingly easier to extract and assess. I do not intend to understate the importance of these components of knowledge of a language. They are particularly important to language learning when a target language-speaking environment is not accessible. In this context, it is practical for language teaching to emphasise such knowledge. If then the language is a subject on the national curriculum, like English in China, learning is often exam and structure oriented. However, when learners are immersed in a target language-speaking society, learning the language becomes a fundamental need of daily communication as well as academic study. As such, the assessment of language competence in the context should not retain the same focus. For international students in the U.K., daily communication in English produces valuable means to practice their communicative competence. Overemphasis on vocabulary and grammar at this stage demotivates them and inhibits them from communicating with other English speakers.

All my Chinese participants were expected to have met the requirement of language proficiency in their academic departments in Britain. Given this, it was assumed that, according to the criteria of their academic departments, their English proficiencies were sufficient to undertake academic activities including understanding lectures. However, some of the participants' comprehension of what was said in the audio extracts was far

from adequate. In many cases, they attributed the lack of comprehension to their inadequate language proficiency. I consider this to be self-defined language problems. However, the problems are not culture-free, and the students' tendency for blaming their language proficiency may reflect a lack of awareness of how much language and culture are entwined (for further discussion about this topic see §6.2.2).

### **3.5 Ethics**

My research follows the two ethical guidelines published by BAAL (The British Association for Applied Linguistics): Recommendations on Good Practice in Applied Linguistics and Recommendations for Good Practice in Applied Linguistics (student projects version). Ethical approval was gained from The Open University Human Participants and Materials Research Ethics Committee (HPMEC) in October 2009 (Appendix 7). Also, I comply with The Open University guidelines for data security.



## **4. Humour in BASE**

This chapter studies the large amount of data in the BASE corpus. In the first part of the chapter, I provide a quantitative review of the laughter tags (LTs) in BASE. In the second part, I introduce the analytical framework that was developed based on the review of a sample of LTs in BASE. This framework summarises the major properties of humour identified in the lectures. It informs the later fieldwork investigation of this study, and has potential pedagogical implications.

In Chapter 3, I explained that Holmes' (2000) definition of humour is taken as a starting point of the discussion in the current study:

Incidences of humour included in this analysis are utterances which are identified by the analyst, on the basis of paralinguistic, prosodic and discoursal clues, as intended by the speaker(s) to be amusing and perceived to be amusing by at least some participants.

(ibid. :163)

Starting from this rather intuitive definition, I follow an inductive approach to developing a characterisation of humour in my study: I have set up rules for identifying instances of humour in the data as described in Chapter 3; in turn these instances have allowed me to draw comparisons and develop a characterisation of humour. This characterisation is presented at the end of this chapter as a product of reviewing instances of humour in a considerable amount of data in BASE.

### **4.1 Laughter in BASE: quantitative analysis**

I used BASE initially to identify the distributive patterns of humour in the lectures. But

problems in the quantification of humour became apparent. All studies which attend to the quantification of humour opt for laughter as a measure, while admitting that the cause of laughter is complicated and not always humour-related (cf. Chafe, 2007; Kersten, 2009; Lee, 2006; Partington, 2006). The reliance on laughter is not surprising considering the fact that perceptible features of laughter, such as a pulse of exhalation and the laughing sound, make its isolation relatively straightforward (see the discussion in Chafe (2007), Province (2000), and Vettin and Todt (2004)). In the current study, laughter is tagged in the BASE transcripts and hence readily identifiable (§3.2.2). Making use of this resource, in the section below, I will firstly demonstrate some overall distributive patterns of the ‘laugh’/‘laughter’ tags in BASE, while bearing in mind critically the connection between laughter and humour. This quantitative analysis provides indirect evidence of the prevalence of humour in the lectures, with laughter regarded as a convenient although not completely satisfactory index of humour. An alternative means of quantifying humour in the context of my study depends on the identification of humour episodes (HEs). However, this is not problem-free either. Firstly, the connection between HEs and humour is problematic as discussed in §3.4.2. Secondly, due to the limitations of the BASE data (see §3.2.2 and §3.2.4), only humour responded to with laughter was readily identifiable in this data set. For these two reasons, HEs identified in the BASE lectures cannot satisfactorily reflect the distribution of humour. An attempt to quantify humour using HEs in the Small Corpus is included in §5.1.

#### **4.1.1. Overall distribution of laughter tags**

Using Wordsmith 5.0, 1114 ‘laughter’ and 315 ‘laugh’ tags were located in the 160 lectures in BASE (also see §3.2.2). The total duration of the BASE lectures is 140 hours and 45 minutes (8445 minutes), so on average there are 1.7 instances of laughter (including

‘laughter’ and ‘laugh’) per 10 minutes of lecture time<sup>23</sup>. The frequency can be compared to that of the Michigan Corpus of Spoken English (MICASE) corpus. MICASE is a 1.7-million word corpus with recordings of speech events which took place at the University of Michigan between 1997 and 2001. It contains the transcripts of 62 academic lectures (4341 minutes in length overall), which mark all laughter as ‘laugh’ (MICASE does not distinguish between single and iterated laughter). There are slightly over 2 laugh tags per 10 minutes in the MICASE lectures (Lee, 2006:54). This overall frequency is slightly higher than that of BASE when ‘laugh’ and ‘laughter’ are conflated.

Laughter occurs more frequently in some other contexts. For instance, MICASE records interactive academic events, such as tutorials and study groups, and provides evidence that laughter in these events is more frequent than in lectures (Lee, 2006:54). Also, Chafe (2007:7-8) studied the Corpus of Spoken American English, which contains mostly conversations in various settings. He reports eight ‘pulses’ of laughter per minute<sup>24</sup> in the data. A potential reason why laughter is less prevalent in lectures is that humour itself is less frequent. Lectures are less interactive than the above-mentioned contexts, and interactions may be conducive to collaborative humour between speakers (cf. Carter (2004) on the prevalence of creativity/play in, particularly, informal interactions). People may also laugh more in contexts in which they are expected to give responses to other

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<sup>23</sup> According to Nesi’s (2012) quantitative analysis, there are on average seven instances of laughter per 10 minutes of lecture time across the BASE lectures, which is much larger than my figure. This difference is due to two reasons. Firstly, her analysis includes instances of ‘laughspeak’ (in total, 608 instances of laughspeak were tagged in BASE) when a lecturer changes voice quality as he/she speaks, blending laughter with speech (ibid.:82), a vocal feature also widely referred to as ‘laughing voice’. These instances are not included in my analysis because I noticed, from the experience of transcribing my own data in Chapter 5, that it was not straightforward to distinguish laughspeak in on-going speech. The accuracy of its tagging in BASE is questionable. If instances of laughspeak are excluded from Nesi’s calculation, there will be five instances of laughter per 10 minutes of lecture time in BASE, which is still much higher than my figure. I believe that this is a mistake in Nesi’s calculation as there are only 10 out of the 160 lectures in BASE having a frequency of laughter that is equal to or more than 5 instances per 10 minutes.

<sup>24</sup> What is regarded to be one ‘pulse’ of laughter in Chafe’s (2007) study is laughter occurring in one single exhalation. Such demarcation of laughter is not performed in BASE.

conversationalists, hence the socialising function of laughter as discussed by many scholars such as Bell (2007b), Coates (2007), and Glenn (2003). In this case, lecturers' humour in class would be less likely to receive laughter than humour in conversations. Reviewing the BASE videos, I have encountered instances of humour that are not responded to with laughter. The prevalence of humour in BASE is therefore likely to be higher than the frequency of laughter tags suggests.

In §3.2.2, I explained that only 'laughter' tags (LTs) were chosen for further qualitative analysis. The discussion hereafter considers only LTs. The audience in the BASE lectures consists of students working at different levels, and there are also a small number of lectures for staff. Table 4.1 displays the frequency of laughter tags (LTs) in BASE by type of audience:

Student level/Audience type	No. of lectures	No. of LTs	LTs per lecture
UG <sup>i</sup>	104	331	3
UG/PG	25	311	13
PG <sup>ii</sup>	17	296	17
Staff	7	85	12
Others	4	39	10
Pre-sessionals <sup>iii</sup>	3	52	18
<b>Total</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>1114</b>	

Table 4.1. Frequency of LTs by audience types

<sup>i</sup>UG- undergraduate; <sup>ii</sup>PG- postgraduate; <sup>iii</sup>The pre-sessionals were preparatory courses for international students who were about to start their undergraduate or postgraduate studies.

A remarkable imbalance of LT numbers in lectures with different kinds of students emerges in the table above: the average number of LTs per lecture for undergraduate students is three, while the numbers are much bigger for other audiences. This discovery suggests two possible interpretations, although neither of these can be reliably confirmed:



- Firstly, if the numerical imbalance represents a genuine difference between lectures, the student level/audience type may be a significant variable in the distribution of laughter/humour. However, the number of non-undergraduate lectures is much smaller than that of undergraduate lectures, and the figures here may not be replicated in a large sample. The BASE data therefore, is inadequate to support an interpretation based on the potential influence of student level/audience type on the occurrence of laughter.
- Secondly, the imbalance may be a result of inaccurate tagging. However, it seems a remote possibility that inaccuracies would show this pattern of distribution. BASE was built long before my study, with the laughter tagged without the transcribers' knowledge of its potential use. During my research, I constantly checked the transcripts with their video recordings; no major mis-tag was identified.

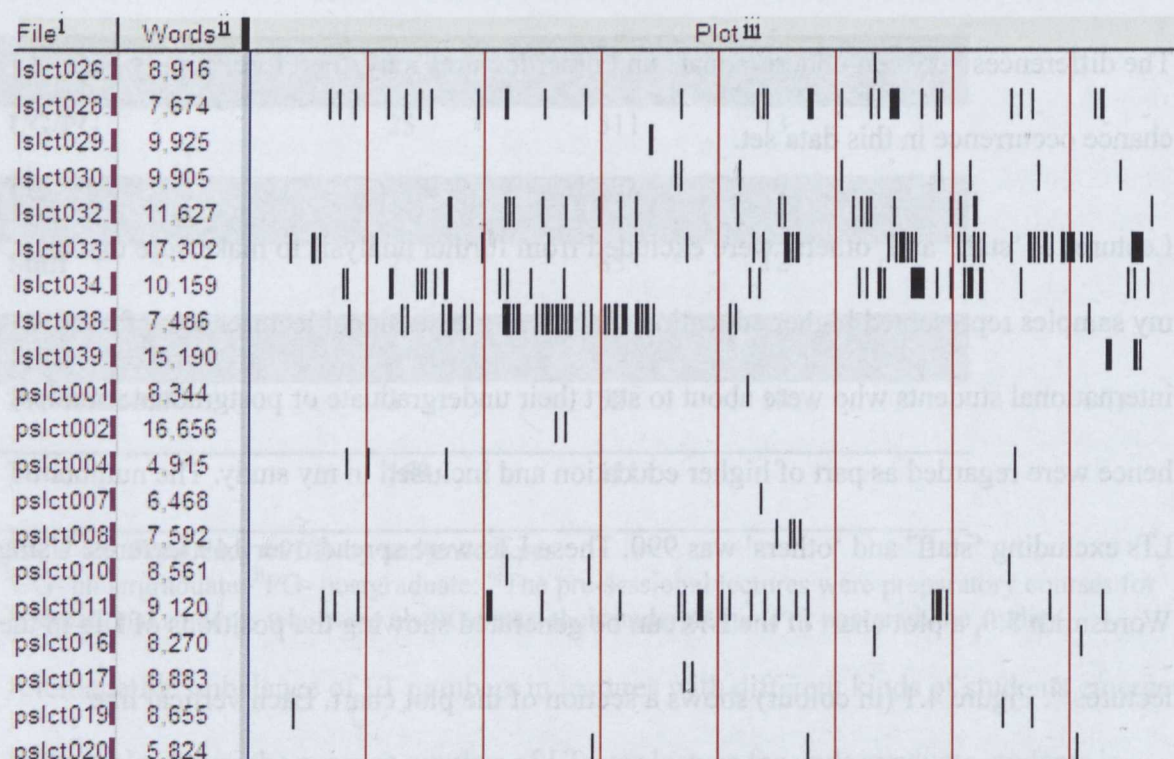
The differences between undergraduate and other lectures may, therefore, simply be a chance occurrence in this data set.

Lectures to 'staff' and 'others' were excluded from further analysis to make sure that all my samples represented higher education. The three pre-session lectures were for international students who were about to start their undergraduate or postgraduate studies, hence were regarded as part of higher education and included in my study. The number of LTs excluding 'staff' and 'others' was 990. These LTs were spread over 149 lectures. Using Wordsmith 5.0, a plot chart of the LTs can be generated showing the positions of LTs in the lectures<sup>25</sup>. Figure 4.1 (in colour) shows a section of the plot chart. Each vertical line

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<sup>25</sup> In the plot chart generated by Wordsmith 5.0, the position of an LT in a lecture is measured according to the word number of its emergence in the complete transcript of the lecture.

represents one emergence of an LT. The figure shows that LTs were spread irregularly across lectures, and were much more prevalent in some lectures than others (see further discussion below). LTs also tended to cluster at particular points in lectures where they were more prevalent, e.g. ls1ct033, ls1ct038 and ps1ct011. The clustering tendency can be observed throughout the complete plot chart of LTs in the 149 lectures. A similar phenomenon is noticed by Partington (2006) in his study of a corpus of White House briefings. Partington comments that ‘laughter seems to spawn more laughter’ (ibid.:10). This clustering tendency may suggest that if a speaker successfully triggers a bout of laughter from the audience, it is relatively easy to trigger more bouts afterwards. In other words, once an atmosphere of laughing is created, the audience tend to laugh more easily. Further investigation into this speculation is needed, although this is not a focus of the current study.



<sup>i</sup>File - lecture name; <sup>ii</sup>Words - total number of words in the transcript of a lecture; <sup>iii</sup>Plot - each short black vertical line shows where an LT emerges in a lecture according to its word number in the lecture's transcript; the two long blue lines represent the boundaries of a lecture, and the long red

lines divide each lecture into eight segments<sup>26</sup>.

#### 4.1.2. Disciplinary and departmental distribution

Table 4.2 displays the distribution of LTs in the four disciplinary groups included in BASE.

The average number of LTs per lecture is seven, but their distribution across the disciplinary groups is very uneven. Lectures in Life and Medical Sciences (LS) and Social Studies and Sciences (SS) contain far more LTs than those in Arts and Humanities (AH) and Physical Sciences (PS). However, the high Standard Deviations (SD) in the former two disciplinary groups suggest that LTs are also spread very unevenly within these groups. If we look at the top ten lectures with most LTs (Table 4.3), the uneven distribution of LTs across the BASE lectures becomes more obvious.

Disciplinary group	No. of lectures	No. of LTs	LTs per lecture	SD <sup>i</sup>
AH	40	146	4	5.53
LS	31	298	10	17.25
PS	39	107	3	5.72
SS	39	439	11	14.38
<b>Total</b>	<b>149</b>	<b>990</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>11.99</b>

Table 4.2. Division of 990 LTs across disciplinary groups

<sup>i</sup> SD = standard deviation.

<sup>26</sup> In a plot chart generated in Wordsmith, such as the one which Figure 4.1 was extracted from, texts with varying total word numbers are skewed to show as rectangles with the same length between the blue lines. As a result, the eight segments divided by the red vertical lines are proportional representations, meaning that word numbers within each segment are the same in one lecture, but vary between different lectures. Although Wordsmith can also generate plot charts showing segments with equal word numbers across different texts, the visual clarity of such charts is unsatisfactory and does not in fact facilitate observational comparisons across lectures. I therefore decided to adopt the form of the plot chart as shown in Figure 4.1.



The top ten lectures in Table 4.3 contain over 40% of all the LTs in the BASE lectures.

Four of these come from one department - lectures to Leicester Warwick Medical School

(LWMS), making it the most laughter-abundant department in BASE. But three of these

lectures were taught by the same lecturer (marked '#')<sup>27</sup>. There are also lectures in LWMS

which have few or even no LTs. The high concentration of LTs in some disciplinary

groups/departments seems to be associated with particular lecturers. I was therefore unable

to reliably identify any disciplinary effect in the distinction of LTs, but there are substantial

differences between individual lecturers with some appearing to adopt a more 'humorous

style' than others. This was borne in mind in my identification of humorous episodes,

discussed in §4.2 below.

Lecture name <sup>28</sup>	Department	Lecture Title	Audience	No. of LTs
ls1ct033#	LWMS (Leicester Warwick Medical School)	Acute Renal Failure	UG/PG	65
ss1ct005	Centre for the Study of Women and Gender	Current issues in feminism	PG	63
ls1ct038	LWMS	Introduction to DISC (Developing Interview Skills in the Consultation)	UG/PG	51
ls1ct034#	LWMS	Glomerular Nephritis	UG/PG	48
ss1ct038	CELTE (Centre for English Language Teacher Education)	Dictionaries	Pre-sessional	46

<sup>27</sup> In BASE, 20 lecturers were recorded more than once.

<sup>28</sup> Lecture names in BASE are made up of five letters and three digits. The first two letters indicate the disciplinary group (see the four disciplinary groups in BASE at the beginning of this section), 'lct' stands for 'lecture', and the digits are unique identifiers (Nesi and Thompson, 2006).

Lecture name <sup>28</sup>	Department	Lecture Title	Audience	No. of LTs
lslct028#	LWMS	Kidney Stones	UG/PG	36
sslct003	Applied Linguistics	Applied Linguistics and Language teaching	UG/PG	35
pslct011	Cybernetics	Critically damped response	UG	33
lslct009	Mathematics	Alien Ecology	Others	31
sslct002	Agricultural and Food Economics	Questionnaire design and attitude measurement	PG	31
<b>Total</b>				<b>439</b>

Table 4.3. Top ten lectures with most LTs in BASE

## 4.2 Data selection and identification of humour episodes in BASE

Since I intended to select a sample of data in BASE for further qualitative analysis, the discovery above suggested that the selection should not be restricted to one or two departments or disciplinary groups. I therefore selected lectures from the ‘top 5’ - those with the most LTs. I selected only one lecture from each lecturer so as to prevent the selected data’s representation being dominated by any single lecturer. Accordingly, lslct034 was excluded. I then noticed that analysis of these laughter-abundant lectures was very difficult without visual information to show what was happening as humour occurred. To facilitate the analysis, only lectures that had been video recorded were chosen, thus excluding sslct005. As a result, three lectures - lslct033, lslct038 and sslct038 - with the most LTs were selected for further analysis. These included a total of 174 LTs.

The majority of the 149 lectures (55 lectures) contain many fewer LTs: one to five per

lecture. These lectures were all selected for further analysis. In this group of lectures, seven lecturers gave more than one lecture (two lectures each). Since the number of LTs in each of these lectures was comparatively small, both lectures given by the same lecturer were included without making any single lecturer's LTs dominant in the whole group. Among the 55 lectures, 22 did not have video recordings. The LTs in these lectures (69 in total) were still included for further identification of humour episodes since their transcripts were comparatively intelligible as compared to those of the laughter-abundant lectures. But as I explained in §3.2.2, I followed a prudent approach to filtering out instances of humour, meaning that any instances of laughter, whose relation to humour was uncertain after reviewing available resources in BASE, were excluded. The group of 55 lectures contain 153 LTs overall. This gave a final total of 327 LTs in 58 lectures. Following the methods documented in §3.2.2, 157 HEs were identified based on the 327 LTs.

### **4.3 The analytical framework: qualitative analysis**

An in-depth qualitative review of the HEs was conducted to code recurrent themes of humour in these episodes. Three broad dimensions of analysis were drawn on, reflecting the characteristics of humour in BASE: formal, semantic and functional. The formal dimension echoes what Maybin and Swann (2007a:513) describe as the textual dimension of language creativity: '[I]inguistic forms and structures, at word/sentence level and above; may also include formal multimodal analysis'. This dimension allows the identification of the linguistic forms taken by humour in BASE. The semantic dimension concerns meaning expressed in on-going humorous utterances. Following Cook (2000:123), I include the invocation of alternative realities in this dimension, a prevalent characteristic of humour in BASE. The functional dimension considers how the lecturers use humour in lectures. My analysis of the BASE data focuses on interpersonal functions as explained below.

<b>Dimensions of analysis</b>	<b>Analytical level</b>
Formal dimension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• word/sentence level</li> <li>• text</li> <li>• paralinguage</li> </ul>
Semantic dimension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• play with meaning including the invocation of alternative realities</li> </ul>
Functional dimension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• interpersonal aspects of humour (interpreted in terms of face acts and the expression of stance)</li> </ul>

The analysis of humour according to these dimensions will be explained in detail in §4.3.1-3. As pointed out in §3.2.4, it is unrealistic to expect that the analysis of the BASE data, despite its large quantity, will cover all potential forms or functions of humour in British academic lectures. There may be other characteristics not included in the framework above. However, all HEs identified in BASE can be accounted for within this framework. The framework provided a basis for the analysis of humour and for the selection of HEs for the playback and discussion sessions with students and lecturers outlined in §3.3.2. Furthermore, the analytic framework has potential pedagogical implications (§7.2.2).

My analysis indicated the importance of incongruity as a feature of all HEs in BASE. In the sections below, I will argue progressively that humour arises from the interplay between incongruous formal, semantic, and/or functional properties, and between these properties and the institutional context of a lecture. A point to be stressed here is the co-effect of characteristics of humour identified according to the dimensions above - humour in any HE is accounted for by referring to multiple characteristics. However, to aid clear presentation, particular characteristics are exemplified separately below. This presentation

does not effectively reflect the interplay between different aspects of humour, and this limitation needs to be borne in mind throughout the discussion below. A more holistic approach to the analysis of humour in lectures is conducted in Chapter 5 with data from the Small Corpus.

### 4.3.1. Formal dimension

#### Word/sentence level

This level of analysis concerns the manipulation of linguistic form, and the selection of certain words and phrases in an HE. Humour at the word/sentence level, such as repetition, puns and other types of word play, has long been the focus of humour study and language creativity (see §2.3.3). In the BASE data, humour of this type occurs only eight times, and five of these come from the same lecture in which the lecturer discusses how new words and phrases emerge in English (see Example 2). Below are some examples.

#### Example 1, pun - top

- 1 Lah20<sup>29</sup>: I think, the fissures are opening up, let me start, let me start at the top  
2 <takes off jumper>  
3 sorry I'm not just going # it sounds like I'm doing a striptease  
4 SS: <laughter>  
5 Lah20: if I don't take my # pullover (inaudible) which wasn't the intention at all, #,  
6 let's start with the king
- (ahlct020)

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<sup>29</sup> For all the transcripts in this thesis, 'L' stands for the lecturer; 'S' stands for a single student; 'SS' stands for multiple students; 'SL' stands for multiple students together with the lecturer. The lecture codes in BASE are used to distinguish the lecturer speakers as in 'Lah020'.



## Example 2, word play - chunnel

- 1 Lss38: I'll try some more on you  
2 <writes on transparency> CHUNNEL </>  
3 this one, was very common a few years back but it doesn't seem to be used  
4 so much now, do you know what it is,  
5 S: channel tunnel  
6 ,  
7 Lss38: yes the channel tunnel  
8 SL: <laughter>

(sslct038)

In Example 1, the two scripts (see §2.4.3) arising from 'top' - the highest location and the clothing worn on the upper body - are equally salient. The clash of these scripts can be considered humorous in itself irrespective of the sexual connotation that it bears (see also repressive humour in §4.3.3). The pun in Example 1 occurs incidentally and is made salient through Lah20's comment. This is different from Example 2, in which the word play is introduced to the students as a teaching point. In this example, the two words, 'channel' and 'tunnel', are blended together, which is unexpected for people who first encounter it. The pun and the word play above can potentially retain their humour even if uttered in a different context. However, another type of word/phrase-related humour - swear words - is more dependent on the context of an academic lecture, an occasion in which swearing is usually inappropriate.

Uttering swear words in lectures can be seen as a type of register humour. Register is a cluster of features of speech or writing associated with a certain type of occasion or a certain group of people (cf. Halliday, 1978). Attardo (1994:230) discusses register humour 'caused by an incongruity originating in the clash between two registers'. Lecture talk as

happens in a classroom is a type of institutional discourse (cf. Arminen, 2005; Drew and Heritage, 1992) which 'is normally informed by goal orientations of a relatively restricted conventional form' (Drew and Heritage, 1992:22). In this context, the use of an informal register in the lecturer's utterance, such as using swear words, may generate humour.

There are some uses of swear words in the BASE data. In the two examples below, the swearing is responded to with laughter, suggesting that the audience are not offended. This can be explained using Grice's maxims (see §2.4.1) - the lecturer's ostensible use of taboo language in an institutional context violates manner, and implies that the taboo language should not be taken seriously.

#### Example 3, swear words - frightening the shit out of the enemy

1 Lah20: Running, at the enemy, firing as they go, basically, frightening the shit out of the #

2 SS: <laughter>

3 Lah20: the enemy

(ahlct020)

#### Example 4, swear words - Sainsbury's and Tesco

1 Lss32: one of the worst examples of competing on price, was Sainsbury and Tesco's

2 getting into a price war, you know, so, Sainsbury's goes down on three pence,

3 on # baked beans <angry voice> you bastard, four pence on ravioli you swine </>

4 frozen peas down

5 SS: SS: <laughter>

(sslct032)

Alongside the use of swear words, Example 4 above is also distinct in the lecturer's use of paralinguistic features with a shift of voice in his reported speech (see §2.4.4 'heteroglossia and double-voicing') which animates angry exchanges between two major supermarkets in

the U.K. I will discuss this further in the section on paralanguage.

## **Text level**

At a textual level, the structures of the HEs in BASE are highly diversified and often difficult to classify. Some relatively clear and independent structures include stories/anecdotes and jokes. These are narratives of ‘a sequence of events that are perceived to be non-randomly connected, typically involving one or more humans or other sentient participants’ (Toolan, 2006:54). Stories and anecdotes are not distinguished in my discussion as they are often talked about interchangeably in everyday life and humour studies such as Norrick (1993, 2003). I will also refer to them sometimes as narratives. However, following Norrick (2003), I use the term ‘personal anecdotes’ to refer specifically to accounts that are presented as real events that happened to the teller him/herself. In total 26 instances of stories/anecdotes are coded in the BASE data.

### **Example 5, story/anecdote - Ranke’s motto**

- 1   Lah24:   in early modern times, his motto for what he was doing was labor ipse voluptas,  
2           meaning work itself is pleasure, with the kind of hint that word voluptas if any of  
3           you sort of done Latin, will know that it means sort of kind of pleasure of an almost  
4           sort of erotic and sexual kind, you may or may not wish to relate that to the fact  
5           that he didn't actually get married till he was forty-eight  
6   SS:       <laughter>  
7   Lah24:   and he used to write letters to his brother, about caressing documents in the archives,  
8   SS:       <laughter>  
9   Lah24:   as if they were loved ones, now one critic Krieger, # put a Freudian kind of spin on  
10           this and # other statements he made trying to show that this showed that Ranke

- 11            was sort of you know, # you know getting off with these documents instead of off  
 12            # with # with his wife

(ahlct024)

Example 6, story/anecdote - too many bananas

- 1    Lah17:    another example, of Samuel Beckett in a play, # Samuel Beckett in a play called #  
 2            La Dernière Bande which is translated fetchingly as Krapp's Last Tape, # , so # La  
 3            Dernière Bande, # where the character # basically is suffering from # constipation  
 4            because he's eaten too many bananas,  
 5    SS:        <laughter>  
 6    Lah17:    # , so # what's this got to do with real life well it's it's just a a kind of escape isn't it

(ahlct017)

Some elements of Labov's (1972) model of narratives (see §2.4.4) can be identified in the examples above. For instance in Example 5, 'in early modern times, his motto for what he was doing was labor ipse voluptas' (L#1<sup>30</sup>), 'he didn't actually get married till he was forty-eight' (L#5), and Ranke's writing letters to his brother in L#7-9 may be analysed as an orientation to the anecdote; that Krieger explained Ranke in a Freudian sense in L#9-12 is complicating action. Example 6 has a more ambiguous structure, but the first two lines may be seen as orientation, and the character's suffering from constipation after having eaten too many bananas as complicating action. In both cases, these are embryonic narratives, not reflecting the full set of Labovian features.

Another structure of humour that can be identified in BASE is jokes. According to Chiaro (1992) and Norrick (2003), a joke always contains a punchline. Chiaro (1992:48) further defines a punchline as the point which is linguistically or semantically incongruous with

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<sup>30</sup> 'L#' stands for 'line number'.

the previous text. Example 7 below qualifies as a joke.

Example 7, joke - operations that a gynaecologist is competent at

- 1 Lss33: it's like, minijoke what are what are the #, three operations that a a  
2 gynaecologist is competent at, have you heard this one, (inaudible),  
3 oh come on,  
4 SS: <laughter>  
5 Lss33: well they can either tie off one ureter, the other ureter or both they're the three  
6 operations that a  
7 SS: <laughter>  
8 Lss33: that a a gynaecologist is competent at, and # , if if you # # give me a few drinks I'll  
9 tell you about some things they are less competent at,  
10 SS: <laughter>

(lslct033)

The punchline in Example 7 resides in the lecturer's revelation of the answer, depicting the incompetence of gynaecologists and contrasting with the professional image of medical doctors. Jokes are frequently studied by scholars in humour and language play and creativity (see §2.3.3), but appear only twice in the BASE data. Moreover, no instances of jokes were identified in the Small Corpus data that I collected. Therefore, this form of humour was not further investigated in my study.

Unlike story/anecdote and joke format, which is used by the lecturers to explain particular teaching points, humour emerges in 13 HEs as fleeting asides injected in the ongoing speech flow. I term such structures quips, and describe their characteristics using the

concept of turns in conversation analysis<sup>31</sup> - a quip is a brief remark; it consists of a small number of turns, usually two or three. In most cases, a quip is a commentary on the previous utterance or an event which has just happened. It may also be a deviation from the ongoing topic. In Example 8, the aside 'very difficult to say if you've had a few drinks' (L#3) foregrounds the extraordinary sound of 'split-split plot'. The lecturer in Example 9 deviates from the narrative of a student's question, and makes a self-deprecating remark about consultant lecturers.

#### Example 8, quip - split-split plot

- 1 Lps2: supposing that, when you're back home, and starting to work somebody says
- 2 I'm doing a three factor experiment, so I'm doing it on a split-split that's called
- 3 a split-split plot, design, very difficult to say if you've had a few drinks
- 4 SS: <laughter>

(pslct002)

#### Example 9, quip - last minute dot com

- 1 Lls33: a student asked me couple of days ago that's why I put this section in, when I was
- 2 preparing this at two o'clock last night don't think look, when we become consultant
- 3 lecturers we don't do things at, last-minute-dot-com we do, #, we're no more
- 4 organized than you are we're just a bit older have a bit less hair
- 5 SS: <laughter>
- 6 Lls33: when I was doing this <laughing voice> at two o'clock last night </>

(lslct033)

Stories/anecdotes and quips are the two most frequent structures of humour in the BASE

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<sup>31</sup> The speech activity in lectures is mainly monologic, and contains little turn-taking. However, it is still applicable to use Transition Relevance Place (TRP) (Sacks et al., 1974) to locate turns in lectures.

data. But they play different roles in contributing to the humour effect. Stories/anecdotes are a common and important type of teaching discourse (cf. Biber, 2003; Mattos, 2009). However, the narrative structures in Examples 5 and 6 do not themselves produce humour. It is the content of the stories/anecdotes that is at work<sup>32</sup>. Quips are incongruous with the on-going discourse. The structural variation plays a part in humour. It may be assumed that humour in quips is more difficult for non-native speakers than in stories/anecdotes considering the former's fleeting and incongruous characteristics. This assumption was tested in the fieldwork study.

### **Paralanguage**

Paralanguage refers to nonlinguistic features of speech such as tone of voice and loudness, and it may also be extended to other nonverbal features such as facial expressions and kinesic movements. It plays a prominent role in humour in the BASE lectures. However, capturing and defining paralinguistic features is immensely complex (cf. Adolphs and Carter, 2007; Carter and Adolphs, 2008), and as explained in §3.2.4, BASE provides limited paralinguistic information. The analysis of humour in BASE can only make use of the available resources, and therefore does not investigate types and functions of paralanguage in depth.

In many HEs, shifts in vocal features signal to the audience something unusual and important which requires special attention. For instance in Example 10 below, Lls33 puts on a different accent as he utters 'dysfunction' in L#11.

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<sup>32</sup> Although one can manipulate the structure of a story or joke to create humour, hence the joke recorded in Chiaro (1992:48), in which the punchline appears in an unexpected position: '[t]here was an Irishman an Englishman and ... BANG!!!'.

### Example 10, paralanguage - dysfunctional families

- 1 Lls33: so lady in the pink  
2 <indicates member of audience>  
3 doing well, so if you're not going to talk about failure to a patient what what can  
4 you say  
5 SF: impairment,  
6 Lls33: impairment, Guardian all right  
7 SM: dysfunction  
8 Lls33: dysfunction ooh yeah, New Scientist, bit, no,  
9 SS: <laughter>  
10 Lls33: you know, man on a, on the bus you know, they don't understand  
11 <mimicking American accent> dysfunction </> , dysfunctional families

(ls1ct033)

In this example, the lecturer asks the students how to talk about failure to a patient. SM suggests 'dysfunction' (L#7). This term may be considered by the lecturer to be over scientific in talking to a patient, and he associates it jokingly with the magazine, New Scientist, in L#8. Then in L#10-11, the lecturer comments on the perceptions of a typical 'man on the bus', who would not understand the scientific term 'dysfunction'. His mimicking of an American accent may highlight its scientific nature. This form of paralinguistically marked reported speech appears six times in the BASE data, and interestingly these all happen in the two laughter-abundant lectures - ls1ct033 and ls1ct038. Another such instance is Example 4 'Sainsbury's and Tesco' (§4.3.1 'Word/sentence level'), in which the lecturer shifts to an angry voice as he personifies the two competing supermarkets animating their argument over price cuts. The lecturer's vocal features heighten the message that the taboo language is not meant to be offensive and should be



taken light-heartedly. I will discuss further in §4.3.3 the discovery that paralinguistically marked reported speech occurs exclusively in these two lectures.

In the two examples above, the changes of vocal features reflexively draw attention to the words and phrases uttered. They invoke the voice of another speaker or speakers with all their associations as the lecturers put on micro performances (cf. Bauman, 1986).

Language and paralanguage work hand in hand in the creation of humour. Paralanguage, especially in the form of facial expressions and kinesic movements, may also be an independent factor in the creation of humour, e.g. in slapstick comedies. I can recall from past experience a few times when my teachers did funny walks or dances in the classroom. No such examples were identified in the BASE data, although they may have been ‘hidden’ because the BASE resources contain insufficient nonverbal information (see §3.2.4). My fieldwork data as discussed in Chapter 5 shows that vocal features can also be an independent factor in the creation of humour. One lecturer, Andy, sometimes whistled in the classroom, which was thought to be humorous by some of the students I interviewed.

#### **4.3.2. Semantic dimension: alternative realities**

A common characteristic of humour arising from my data analysis is the invocation of imaginary or alternative realities. In these imaginary realities, incongruous objects and ideas may be created for the sake of humour and fun. This is consistent with some other research on humour: for instance, Kotthoff et al. (1999:126) suggest that ‘[i]n humour the relationship to reality is loosened and special inferences are needed to create “sense in nonsense”, to use Freud’s expression (1960 [1905])’. Hay (2001) discusses fantasy humour, in which conversationalists jointly construct imaginary scenarios or events. In his analysis of language play, Cook (2000) proposes that ‘reference to an alternative reality’ is a

common feature of play at a semantic level (ibid.:123). I follow Cook in my analysis below, considering alternative realities to be a property of humour in the semantic dimension. In fact, there is an important semantic dimension to some of the examples of humour discussed above. For instance, punning in Example 1 plays with linguistic form, and involves a clash of scripts, a concept that is key to Raskin's (1985) Semantic Theory of Humour (see §2.4.3). Raskin (ibid.) also argues that jokes involve a semantic opposition between scripts. These occur relatively infrequently in BASE, whereas several HEs in BASE manifest a fictitious and fantasised quality, in which the lecturer invokes an alternative reality outside the classroom. I discuss below some examples of this phenomenon:

#### Example 11 - the French revolution

- 1 Lah20: you may have noticed I was sort of getting rather # , enthusiastic and carried away  
2 at the end of the last one I was sort of almost # like I sort of started at the beginning  
3 about someone standing on a coffee table and s- shouting to arms citizens,  
4 as if I was going to sort of , leap up on the desk and say to arms let's storm,  
5 the Rootes Social Building  
6 SS: <laughter>

(ahlct020)

#### Example 12 - a McCarthyite question

- 1 Lah25: I could perhaps begin this lecture therefore with a sort of McCarthyite question are  
2 you now or have you ever been,  
3 SS: <laughter>  
4 Lah25: a Marxist and the camera will pick you out <laugh>, and # sort of  
5 SS: <laughter>

6 Lah25: s- sort of send your name straight to M-I-five

7 SS: <laughter>

(ahlct025)

In Example 11, Lah20 describes a scenario in which he is embarking on a revolutionary act. Lah25 in Example 26 recontextualises (Bauman and Briggs, 1990) a scene of McCarthyite questioning, relating this to the way he might begin a lecture on Marx. In both examples, the 'real' reality, i.e. the lectures, and the imagined reality, i.e. the revolution and the McCarthyite questioning, are paralleled. These parallel realities are examples of what Goffman (1971) describes as keying frames: social members make sense of their behaviour by organising, or framing, it into conventional structures (primary frames) which map out the typical place, participants involved and conducts; the participants in a primary frame can however also key and transform this into something different. The notion of keying has been employed by Kotthoff et al. (1999) to analyse what they call 'joint fictionalisation' in humour, and by Maybin and Swann (2007a) to analyse everyday language creativity. These studies show effectively how conversationalists jointly establish playful frames. In the two examples above, the primary frame is the lectures, but the lecturers also key or rekey them as a revolution and an episode of McCarthyite questioning respectively.

Keying alternative realities in the form of educational activities such as role-play has been discussed as an important feature of language classrooms by scholars including Appel (2007), Cook (2000), and Edmondson (1985):

[T]eachers and learners do attempt to break out of the constraints the classroom imposes as a social setting in terms of the types of talk that occur there. Thus, popular learning activities (and not only recently) include role-playing of various kinds, different types of language-games, and the use of drama. 'Makebelieve' - a suspension of belief in the reality of the classroom learning task - may be said to characterise such activities.

The BASE data shows that such keying of alternative realities is also common in non-language classrooms and is a frequent source of humour. An example of humour resulting from this practice is illustrated in Example 13 below. This example is somewhat different from Examples 11 and 12 discussed above. In these two examples, the lecturers individually key the alternative realities. In Example 13, the alternative reality is collaboratively keyed by the lecturer and some students, who carry out role-play in which a doctor is taking the drug history of a patient.

Example 13, role-play – taking a drug history

- 1 Lls33: how do you, how do you take a drug history then, from the patient, just
- 2 a bit of role play
- 3 SF1 you ask to see their chart
- 4 Lls33: bit of role play
- 5 SF1 <sigh>
- 6 SS: <laughter>
- 7 SF1 if they're in hospital you can ask to see their chart rather than ask them
- 8 Lls33: yeah I know but they're not they haven't got they're in the medical admissions,
- 9 ask me some questions
- 10 SF1 (inaudible) what drugs you're on
- 11 Lls33: about what what drugs I'm on
- 12 SF1 what tablets do you take every day
- 13 Lls33: I'm not telling you,
- 14 SS: <laughter>
- 15 Lls33: come on,
- 16 SM1 what are you taking

17 Lls33: oh you better go than that

18 SS: <laughter>

19 Lls33: that's just one you've got to ask the question again

20 SF1 # can you as- , could you tell me what drugs you're taking,

21 Lls33: <sigh> # I gave them to the other doctor earlier, didn't you write them

22 down

23 SF1 (inaudible) do you have them, them with you any of them

24 Lls33: well they're in my bag they're, do you want me to get it

25 SF1 yeah

26 Lls33: all right

27 SF1 could I have a look at them

28 Lls33: okay

29 SS: <laughter>

30 Lls33: so #, I don't know I don't know which one I'm I I don't know which one I'm

31 I'm taking but you know and I've got a big I've got a list here from my G-P, and

32 and I've got a load here, and I I I don't know you know I I- I I don't know

33 I mean every doctor I see puts me on a different tablet,

34 SF1 #,

35 Lls33: come on Gestapo,

36 SF1 which of those did you take this morning

37 Lls33: very good all right we're getting there very good, d- do you really want to know

38 all right okay I took this, # well I don't know what it's called it's blue,

39 SS: <laughter>

40 Lls33: do you know the do you know the blue one doctor

41 SS: <laughter>

42 ,

43 SF1 <laugh> do you have the bottle so I can

44 SS: <laughter>

45 SF1 see the label

46 Lls33: all right here is here it is here it is okay so you're writing it down okay,

47 so, very good okay I'll we'll stop there

(ls1ct033)

In this extract, Lls33 teaches the student how to take a drug history of a patient. He chooses to do a role-play activity. An imaginary reality is thus initiated, with two students, SF1 and, to a lesser extent SM1, taking on the role of doctor, and the lecturer taking on the role of patient. There is some initial resistance to this activity, with SF1 sighing and then suggesting looking at the patient's chart rather than questioning them. The students are relatively unfamiliar with taking drug histories, and the ways in which they question the imaginary patient, especially at the start of the role-play (L#12-19), are not seen as satisfactory. But the lecturer, who now acts as the patient, is experienced in doctor-patient communication. The lecturer makes use of the students' inexperience in this doctor-patient scenario, and plays an uncooperative patient whose responses are difficult for SF1 and SM1 to deal with and provoke laughter from the other students. Moreover, while the lecturer plays the patient (L#13 'I'm not telling you'), he also maintains his role as a lecturer giving the students feedback (L#17 'oh you better go than that'). His swift and, to a certain extent, unexpected shifts between the two keyings give rise to incongruities. This example suggests that in a role-play activity, incongruities may arise between the participants both in terms of what to say or do in the imaginary scenario, and from their shifts between the persona they play in the imaginary scenario and the lecture, in both cases creating a potential for humour. The role-play in Example 13 generates frequent laughter: it has seven LTs in total, making it one of the HEs with the highest number of LTs in the BASE data. In Example 13, as in other examples, role-play in the BASE lectures is

an educational activity. Further discussion of how role-play functions institutionally and its relation to humour is included in §5.2.2, in which lecturers' accounts of humour are drawn on.

Keying of alternative realities in humour is not always overtly announced, as in the role play in Example 13. Nor does the alternative reality necessarily involve the invocation of events that are unlikely to happen in the reality of the lecture, such as the revolution in Example 11, and the McCarthyite question in Example 12. Keying alternative realities, as shown in many examples in BASE, may take the form of acting out reported speech. Reported speech is involved in many of the HEs in BASE (such as Example 4 'Sainsbury's and Tesco' and Example 10 'dysfunctional families'). Below is a further example:

Example 14, reported speech - the love of Christ

- 1 Lls38: non-verbal, communication can also be paralinguistic, things like the tone of your  
2 voice and your voice quality, can communicate, important things, recently  
3 got a new curate in my church, and she goes on about  
4 <mimicking another's voice> the love of Christ </>  
5 SS: <laughter>  
6 Lls38: and i think <shudder noise> <laugh>, every time she does it, I'm, i know it's wrong  
7 but, <sigh> i just wish somebody had taken her an- aside and said, you can learn  
8 how to make your voice, more, relaxing,  
9 SL: <laughter>

(lslct038)

At the beginning of Example 14, the lecturer introduces the idea that paralanguage can communicate important information. He illustrates this with an example from his experience in his church with a new curate, and mimics her voice, saying 'the love of

Christ' (L#4). There are a number of aspects that contribute to the humour in this example. Firstly, the lecturer's sudden change of voice, as well as the specific strange tone he adopts, can be regarded as a source of humour. Secondly, the curate's intonation of 'the love of Christ' conflicts with the phrase's meaning. For Christians, Christ's love is synonymous with benevolence; the curate's delivery of this phrase (as the lecturer's mimicry of her shows in the video recording of this example) is given in a harsh and discomforting tone, a characteristic that is further emphasised by the lecturer's suggesting her voice could be 'more [...] relaxing'. This incongruous juxtaposition of love and harshness creates a humorous effect. My analysis of this example, however, focuses on another significant aspect of the humour it contains, namely the invocation of alternative realities through reported speech. Tannen (1989[2007]) makes the point that when speakers cast others' words in dialogue, they give voice to the them, and '[t]he creation of voices occasions the imagination of alternative, distant, and others' worlds by linking them to the sounds and scenes of one's own familiar world' (ibid.:133). By mimicking his church curate (L#4) and subsequently recreating his own reaction at that moment (L#6-8), the lecturer is not simply reporting an event he experienced, but animating a scene that occurred in the past outside of the classroom, and hence is presenting an alternative reality to the lecture in which he is speaking. In relaying the curate's speech, the lecturer is not simply repeating what he heard in church, but expressing his criticism of her delivery (also see the discussion of stance/evaluation in humour in §4.3.3). To sum up, alternative realities created through reported speech in Example 14 play an important role in the formation of its humour.

Humour related to alternative realities occurs particularly often in the lectures with a high number of LTs, i.e., ls1ct033 and ls1ct038 (see Table 4.3 in §4.1.2). In these lectures, keying of alternative realities occurs in nine HEs, generating in total 30 bouts of laughter. These



include three of the HEs with most LTs identified in the BASE data (Example 14 being one of them). My analysis of the BASE examples above shows that alternative realities are strongly associated with incongruity, an essential characteristic of humour discussed in §4.3.4. This is achieved in the following ways:

- alternative realities are incongruous with the reality of the lecture (all examples in this section);
- alternative realities allow incongruous activities that would be unlikely to happen in everyday life (Example 11 ‘the French revolution’; Example 12 ‘a McCarthyite question’)
- when the alternative reality is co-constructed in role-play, different ways in which the participants key it may clash (Example 13 ‘take a drug history’).

#### **4.3.3. Functional dimension: humour as interpersonal**

The studies of humour reviewed in §2.3.3-4 addressed two important functions of humour - interpersonal and task-oriented functions. Numerous empirical studies of humour in discourse have focused on its interpersonal functions, e.g. rapport building in the workplace in Janet Holmes’ research. In studies of humour in the classroom, particularly questionnaire-based studies in the fields of communication and psychology, participants (teachers and students) have also identified certain educational functions, associating humour with teaching and learning. For instance, humour was said to be able to reinforce students’ memory of knowledge (White, 2001) and to motivate students (White, 2001; Ziyaemehr et al., 2011). According to these studies, humour in the classroom is task-oriented or teaching-oriented. However, the division between interpersonal and task-oriented functions is fuzzy, as both functions are likely to be present in examples of

humour in lectures. For example, a lecturer may use humour to save students' face (§2.4.2) and establish good rapport with them, but the good rapport may eventually benefit teaching and learning.

I intend to account for both types of functions in my analysis. However, it is difficult to observe how humour facilitates teaching tasks in the BASE corpus, not least because identifying the task itself is likely to be unreliable without consulting the lecturers. In addition, the resources in BASE provide little evidence of effects on students (e.g. reinforced memory or stimulated motivation), which are associated with humour in classrooms by the participants in White (2001) and Ziyaemehr et al. (2011). My discussion below of the BASE data does not therefore address task-based functions of humour in any depth. These will be however investigated in the analysis of fieldwork data in Chapter 5, which is able to draw on accounts of lecturers and students to support interpretations of humour.

Analysis of the HEs in the BASE corpus did, however, reveal several interpersonal functions of humour in this context. I discuss these below, drawing on the two related concepts of face and stance. I will also raise some hypotheses, as they appear in the analysis, about the problems Chinese students may experience in understanding these aspects of humour.

### **Paradoxical face acts: teasing another participant and joking about someone absent**

Many linguistic studies reveal that humour may be used to carry out aggressive or contentious acts which are potentially face-threatening, while simultaneously performing in-group rapport building and expressing affection (Boxer and Cortés-Conde, 1997; Eggins

and Slade, 1997; Norrick, 2003; Partington, 2006; Schnurr and Chan, 2011). Humour in the BASE data frequently arises when face-threatening acts (FTAs) are implied rather than explicitly delivered - the humour here appears to mitigate the FTAs. In addition, when humour generates laughter from the audience, and as shared laughter is acknowledged to enhance in-group intimacy (cf. Jefferson et al., 1987), the positive face (§2.4.2) of the group members is benefited. Many of these examples involve the use of teasing: a lecturer may tease someone present or joke about someone absent. My definition of teasing follows Keltner et al. (2001:229):

[Teasing is] an intentional provocation accompanied by playful markers that together comment on something of relevance to the target of the tease.

So teasing is first of all provocative - it poses a potential threat to the targeted person's face (§2.4.2) if taken seriously. But teasing is also playful, and the playfulness is always marked. Much psychological and linguistic research has demonstrated that teasing is a way to display common values, and rapport is built through sharing laughter and the message that the act of teasing communicates (Baxter, 1992; Eisenberg, 1986; Norrick, 1993). Teasing, therefore, is paradoxical (also see Boxer and Cortés-Conde (1997)):

Teasing criticises yet compliments, attacks yet makes people closer, humiliates yet expresses affection.

Keltner et al. (1998:1231)

Such a paradoxical type of humour is frequent in the BASE data. Lecturers' teasing the audience and lecturers' self-teasing appear in 28 HEs. Lecturers also joke about someone absent who has no direct contact with anyone in the lectures: this occurs 13 times.

An illustration of the latter, joking about someone absent, occurs in Example 5 'Ranke's motto'. In this episode, the lecturer delivers an anecdote about the German historian Ranke.

The humour is targeted at the historian making fun of his seemingly abnormal orientation to books. It is very unlikely that this would threaten the face of anyone present, while the joy of sharing laughter enhances the bond between the lecturer and the students, and attends to their positive face (§2.4.2). In another example below, Lah22 makes fun of another lecturer in the same department:

Example 15, joking about someone absent - glasses on and off

- 1 Lah22: since I watched the tape of Peter's<sup>33</sup> lecture, I don't know if any of you remember one  
2 of you in the room must, # I'm supposed to take my glasses on and off  
3 SS: <laughter>  
4 Lah22: all the time, right, I've not I noticed after you told Peter that that he I don't think he  
5 put his glasses on once  
6 SL: <laughter>

(ahlct022)

In this episode, Lah22 is referring to his colleague Peter's lecture which was also recorded for the BASE project. In Peter's lecture, one of the students, who is also present in the current lecture, revealed that Lah22 had a habit of constantly taking his glasses on and off. By mentioning this incident, Lah22 takes the risk of being laughed at again, potentially threatening his own face. But when he points out that Peter did not even put on his glasses after the student's revelation, he makes fun of Peter's self-conscious behaviour. As such, Lah22 laughs at himself first, and then generates more laughter at the expense of Peter. Laughing together with the students enhances in-group positive face, and Lah22's initial 'attack' at himself mitigates the threat of the FTA targeted at his colleague, Peter.

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<sup>33</sup> All names appearing in the transcripts in this thesis are pseudonyms.

Example 16 below concerns the teasing of someone present. Lls10 introduces to the students several other lecturers who are also in the classroom, teasing one of them, Adam.

Example 16, teasing - nickname

- 1 Lls10: the first thing I want to talk about, is the staff, who are going to be running this  
2 particular class, # you know me I'm <name>, my colleagues, over there, #  
3 there's <name> who will put his hand up, <name>, <name> #,  
4 <laughing voice> sorry </> <name> she's recently changed her name which always  
5 confused me Adam, Adam he has a nickname  
6 SS: <laughter>  
7 Lls10: which I'm going not going to release to you, you may find out later

(ls1ct010)

It is potentially face-threatening to a lecturer that his/her nickname is known by students. Lls10 teases Adam by revealing that he has a nickname, which may in fact be a sign of their intimacy. In this respect, the lecturer appears to be 'biting' and 'bonding' with Adam at the same time. This ambiguity mitigates the potential threat to Adam's face. The shared laughter triggered by Lls10's utterance then enhances the bond between the lecturer and students. In the two examples above, the power distribution between the teaser and the teased/joked about is symmetrical. The following example shows how a FTA at high risk of offence is performed in an asymmetrical power exchange. In the lecture, a student insists that the log of zero is zero as he learned this in a university in Dublin.

Example 17, teasing - log of zero

- 1 Lps20: it may be in Dublin dear boy but it's minus-infinity in the rest of the world

Lps20's comment in this example violates the maxim of quality as he 'denies' the universality of mathematics. Through this violation and the seemingly patronising way of addressing the student ('dear boy'), the lecturer may be alluding to his naivety and lack of mathematical knowledge, and potentially also to the stereotype of 'stupid Irish people' (Davies, 1990:11). The lecturer's FTA targeting the student causes a burst of laughter. Although the audience are amused, it is likely that the teased student feels embarrassed or even offended. But Lps20's higher power position and the student's error make such a threat 'affordable'.

### **Self-targeted face acts: self-deprecation**

FTAs towards oneself do not necessarily undermine one's face (§2.4.2). In fact, these may be a good strategy to save face. Jefferson (1984) describes how laughter defuses seriousness in talk about troubles. In the case when the speaker has incidentally trapped himself/herself into an awkward situation, the use of humour to generate laughter may be a skilful way to divert attention, defuse tension and bring the situation to an end. In my study, I refer to humour involving self-targeted face acts as self-deprecation. Such humorous face acts are also commonly referred to as self-teasing. In this thesis, 'self-deprecation' and 'self-teasing' are used interchangeably. Example 18 below is an instance of self-deprecation. Lah17's white board marker did not work, and he delivered what he called 'a joke' which turned flat. In this episode, he pokes fun at his failed joke.

Example 18, self-deprecation - that was a joke

1 Lah17: that was a joke actually so you were supposed to laugh then

- 2 SS: <laughter>  
3 Lah17: okay not a good actor I'm afraid

(ahlct017)

Example 19 is another instance of self-deprecation. It is part of a long exchange between a lecturer and one student during a pre-sessional lecture on the EU (European Union) and EMU (Economic and Monetary Union).

Example 19, self-deprecation - out of my depth

- 1 S1: what do you think about the relationship between European Union and the  
2 (mondial) organisation of commerce (or) this O-M-C, the G-A-T-T or,  
3 Lss24: and # and W-T-O and things like that  
4 S1: yeah  
5 SS: <laughter>  
6 Lss24: do you do you do you have a more specific version of that question #, I I  
7 S1: #  
8 Lss24: I feel myself,  
9 S1: just-  
10 Lss24: -I feel myself being drowned more and more out of out of my depth  
11 SS: <laughter>  
12 Lss24: but but but see whether you can-  
13 S1: [-just just  
14 Lss24: [pin me down a bit more

(sslct024)

S1 raises a question during which he has difficulty in naming some trade organisations. Lss24 then helps him finish his list by adding WTO and a vague expression, 'things like that' in L#3. This use of ambiguity seems to mock the generality of S1's question, and

triggers laughter in the classroom. Lss24 then asks S1 to modify his question. Lss24 is faced with a very broad question which is difficult to answer and may threaten his competence face - the need to be seen as competent and authoritative (Partington, 2006). He deals with this potential threat with humour in L#8-10, describing his situation metaphorically, and probably ironically, as being drowned. This metaphorical usage violates quality (§2.4.1). In this context, the students can easily infer Lss24's real meaning: 'the question was too broad for me to answer'. This risks being interpreted as the lecturer's admission of his incompetence, but the dramatic and vivid metaphor leads to a bout of laughter and effectively dwarfs the potential embarrassment. In the meantime, Lss24 shows his affective face - the need to be seen as congenial and non-threatening (Partington, 2006), as he avoids threatening S1's positive face by not criticising his question directly.

In the two examples of self-deprecation above, the lecturers deprecate themselves for failing to deliver an idea (Example 18) and answer a question (Example 19). In these examples, self-deprecation is used to tackle potential face-loss. One may also deprecate oneself in situations without potential face-loss. Example 20 is a good illustration of self-deprecation, in which degrading one's face actually helps to improve it.

Example 20, self-deprecation - the surviving dinosaur

- 1 Lah25: Well I'll just begin by a a slight sort of #, introduction when I arrived at <name of
- 2 university> # what seems like a lifetime ago but was only thirty-one years ago in
- 3 nineteen-sixty-eight, # I would think probably about forty per cent of the members of
- 4 staff, were, Marxists E P Thompson of course was the the doyen of the # of Marxist
- 5 British Marxist historians and was was here in the social history centre, and a straw
- 6 poll conducted amongst # first year basic one students in a lecture in nineteen-sixty-
- 7 nine, revealed that something like forty per cent of the students # saw themselves as



8           either Marxist or sympathetic to Marxism, #, times have obviously changed and #  
 9           now when Marx is brought up as a topic # I'm wheeled out as one of the surviving  
 10          dinosaurs as it were in the department, # most of the remaining Marxists either being  
 11          dead or long departed or have become Liberal Democrats  
 12   SS:     <laughter>

(ahlct025)

Example 20 occurs at the opening of the first of a series of lecture on Karl Marx, in which Lah25 refers humorously to the decline of Marxism amongst academic historians. Lah25 introduces himself as a dinosaur (L#9-10): a Marxist surviving from a bygone age. However, his self-deprecation does not undermine his face: firstly, 'the surviving dinosaur' as a metaphor violates the maxim of quality and leads to the audience's awareness of a play frame, signalling the talk as non-serious (Bateson, 1953; Coates, 2007); within this play frame, Lah25's self-deprecation is not interpretable as a real intention to degrade himself. Secondly, Lah25's anecdote of the straw poll in 1969 and the sarcastic juxtaposition of Marxists becoming Liberal Democrats depicts the lecturer himself as consistent compared to many ex-Marxists who have become 'establishment'. Therefore, Lah25's competence face is actually enhanced.

### **Jocular flattery**

In Example 21 the lecturer humorously appeals to his students' statistical expertise.

Example 21, flattery - semi-statisticians

1   Lps2:   Okay, can anybody, #, let me repeat the question and then I'm interested if any of  
 2           you can now provide an answer you are now you've had fifteen weeks of statistics  
 3           so you're all semi-statisticians

4 SS: <laughter>

(pslct002)

Here, the lecturer may not truly believe that the students qualify as (semi-) statisticians.

The purpose of his jocular flattering is to encourage volunteers to answer his questions and boost a more active atmosphere in class. In this respect, the face flattering is actually a strategy to impose an FTA, i.e. a request for the students' responses. It is uncertain, based on the BASE data, how the lecturer actually evaluates the students' mathematic competence, and it is possible that his praise was ironic meaning that the students have insufficient competence.

The example below occurs shortly after Example 19 'out of my depth'. S1 tried to reframe his question and Example 22 starts with Lss24's response.

Example 22, flattery - MA in International Political Economy

1 Lss24: okay, you wouldn't be by any chance, beginning the M-A in, International Political

2 Economy would you

3 SL: <laughter>

4 Lss24: because that's the sort of question which people will be spending #, a l- a large

5 amount of time discussing, #

6 SS: <laughter>

(sslct024)

Lss24 does not provide a straight answer for S1. Instead, he returns with a question about S1's academic level and subject. This digression flouts the maxim of relevance (§2.4.1). By doing so, the lecturer may be implying that S1 asked a question outside of the expected range of subjects for the discussion. The students in this class are undertaking pre-sessional courses before their actual postgraduate study. By relating S1's question to a possible

Master's degree, the lecturer flatters the student's positive face and mitigates the threat of his implied criticism of the student's question.

The analysis above depicts humour as a versatile means of enhancing self-image, tackling potential face loss, mitigating FTAs, and enhancing solidarity with students. Teasing targeted at others and oneself is ubiquitous in the BASE data. This type of humour 'bites' and 'bonds' at the same time, so it always puts face at risk. A series of studies have investigated responses to teasing in conversation (Drew, 1987; Hay, 2001; Lytra, 2007; Schnurr and Chan, 2011), finding evidence of a range of possible responses including laughter, playing along, ignoring the teasing silently and correcting or denying the teasing. Responses to lecturers' teasing in classrooms are less perceptible, thus it is difficult to tell if the teasing is welcomed by the audience. A useful study touching on this topic is Wanzer et al. (2006), who ask 284 American undergraduates to report their teachers' 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' uses of humour; teasing the students appears under both categories, whereas all the participants consider what they call 'self-disparaging humour' to be appropriate. However, the participants in Wanzer et al. (ibid.) are almost all American citizens, and these perceptions may not be shared by students in Britain.

When people from different linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds are involved, the risks involved in teasing and self-deprecating behaviour may be higher as less in-group knowledge is shared. Nesi (2012) studied laughter events in both BASE and MICASE (§4.1.1) lectures, and found that the lecturers in the BASE corpus often allude to the image of students as being heavy drinkers and party-loving, but this image is not referred to by the lecturers in the laughter events in the MICASE corpus. She attributes this difference to the fact that the legal age to drink alcohol is older in Michigan than in England (ibid.:84). Sociocultural differences of this type may cause more problems for international students'

understanding of their lecturers' teasing and self-deprecation. My fieldwork as elaborated in Chapter 6 will investigate the Chinese students' perceptions of these types of humour - if and how they perceive the face acts, if and how they identify the butt of humour, and whether they appreciate or are offended by the teasing.

### **The expression of stance**

I explained in §2.4.4 that humour is necessarily evaluative. In the BASE lectures, the lecturers constantly express their evaluation of people, objects, entities and propositions they refer to, and position their own evaluation with respect to that of the students. I refer to this use of language as the expression of stance or evaluation<sup>34</sup>. One recurrent theme in BASE is that humour heightens stance. I will argue in this section that stance in humour is often implicitly expressed, and reflects the speaker's and listeners' shared awareness of the implied meaning. Moreover, as stance in humour often reflects sociocultural values, especially those involving taboo topics, it also indicates the speaker's and listeners' shared awareness of these sociocultural values. In this sense, understanding of stance in humour may contribute to in-group positive face (§2.4.2).

Stance is first of all conveyed in face acts, which can be illustrated with all the examples discussed above. Face acts and the expression of stance are inextricably linked. Face acts convey stance toward the people concerned, and humour draws attention to this stance, for example, signalling that a potential threat to face should not be taken seriously. For instance, in Example 15 'glasses on and off', Lah22 may be suggesting jokingly that Peter was too self-conscious; in Example 20 'the surviving dinosaur', the lecturer depicts himself as a continuous adherent of a position that has become unpopular, but this

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<sup>34</sup> 'Evaluation' and 'stance' refer to similar phenomena and are used interchangeably in the thesis.

humorous evaluation is not meant to degrade himself. The violation of maxims in all of these examples alerts the hearer to the fact that there is implied stance in the utterances. In Example 4 'Sainsbury's and Tesco' and Example 10 'dysfunctional families', the paralinguistic shifts signal that the reported speech has been assigned a different stance to those of the assumed original speakers. In all these examples, the stance is highlighted by humour.

Evaluation is an important function of narratives (see §2.4.4), a significant format for humour in BASE. For instance in Example 5 'Ranke's motto', Lah24's anecdote about the historian Ranke evaluates his seemingly abnormal orientation towards books. Verbal performances (cf. Bauman, 1986), often signalled by contextualisation cues (§3.2.2) and discoursal cues such as violation of maxims, involved in story-telling highlight the speaker's stance towards the events narrated. Stance can also be expressed subtly in fleeting quips such as Example 9 'last minute dot com'. The lecturer's comment on his late night working anticipates his students' voice (§2.4.4), who may believe that consultant lecturers are better at time management than students.

As pointed out in §2.4.4, irony has long been associated with evaluation. Kaufer (1981) argues that irony conveys a clear evaluative judgement of the audience, and therefore is an evaluative speech behaviour. Many attempts at defining irony have been made in various studies (for reviews of these attempts see Nelms (2001), Kotthoff (2003) and Attardo (2006)). In my study, I define irony based on Grice's cooperative principle, seeing it as an opposition between what is said and what is meant at the pragmatic level. All utterances with this character are classified as instances of irony in my study. Grice (1989) himself also sees irony as the expression of implicature (§2.4.1). Below is an example of irony in BASE:

### Example 23, irony - things giving you happiness

- 1 Lps16: you can think about X and Y as being anything you like, okay it could be #  
2 it could be that, the two things which you think of as giv-, as giving you a lot of  
3 happiness over which you have preferences, are, #, new clothes and C-Ds, or it  
4 might be, economics lectures and accountancy lectures  
5 SS: <laughter>  
6 Lps16: anything you like

(pslct016)

For students, sitting through lectures may contrast with the idea of happiness that is usually associated with CDs and new clothes. Through making a statement that violates quality (§2.4.1), Lps16 has actually conveyed his disbelief of what he said literally.

My discussion in this section so far has demonstrated that stance is often not explicitly expressed, but may be cued in various ways by the speaker. In the HEs, the same contextualisation cues (§3.2.2) that mark the utterances as humorous may also express the speaker's stance toward people or events that they are talking about. I explained in §2.4.4 that stance in humour can be formally marked by semantic and paralinguistic properties. In Example 10 'dysfunctional families', the change of accent is a cue of double voicing (§2.4.4 'Heteroglossia and double-voicing'). Understanding the stance therefore requires the ability to discern the change of accents. In addition to formal cues, I argued that pragmatic properties, i.e. violating of Grice's maxims (§2.4.1), also plays an important role in expressing stance in humour (my analyses above of Examples 15, 17, 20 and 23 all contain violation of maxims). Noticing stance implicitly expressed in the HEs is often the same process as noticing humour. However, one can notice a stance without considering the utterance to be funny, e.g. when teasing is taken seriously by a student who is therefore offended. Also, one can notice the humour without comprehending the stance heightened

by it. For instance, a student may be amused by the sudden change of the lecturer's vocal quality when he utters 'dysfunction' in Example 10 without perceiving attitude assigned to the reported speech (§4.3.1 'paralanguage').

To sum up, stance in the HEs is expressed implicitly, but it is marked semantically, paralinguistically or pragmatically. To identify and understand the stance, shared knowledge is required. For instance in Example 23, the *a priori* assumption of the ironic statement is that the students measure such things in the opposite way, and a listener needs to be aware of the speaker's assumption to understand the irony. In this sense, understanding of stance reflects the speaker's and listeners' shared awareness of the implied meaning, and signals something in common between the speaker and listener. This is pointed out by Kotthoff (2003:1390), who suggests that irony 'allows us to re-affirm the in-group relations among friends'. This applies to all types of humour in my study. Through heightening stance which invokes commonality between group members, humour may contribute to in-group positive face (§2.4.2).

### **Stance and sociocultural values**

The expression of stance in humour reflects certain sociocultural values. Repression-related humour is typical of sociocultural values: under certain social norms, the individual's freedom is repressed; joking about the repression becomes an acceptable way to release the tension and awkwardness which may be otherwise caused (also see release theories of humour in §2.2.1). Raskin (1985:23) describes repression as 'chafing at restraints'. It is exemplified in jokes about sex and politics. In different societies and different periods of time, its implication varies. Some of my British informants suggested that in British society sex, alcohol and bodily functions are frequent topics in

conversational jokes. Surprisingly, repression is involved in quite a few HEs in BASE.

There are 24 instances which entail a wide range of topics:

- Sex (9 examples)

Example 1, sex - top

- 1 Lah20: I think, the fissures are opening up, let me start, let me start at the top
- 2 <takes off jumper>
- 3 sorry I'm not just going # it sounds like I'm doing a striptease
- 4 SS: <laughter>
- 5 Lah20: if I don't take my # pullover (inaudible) which wasn't the intention at all, #,
- 6 let's start with the king

(ahlct020)

Example 5 'Ranke's motto' is also an example of repression-related humour alluding to sex.

- Bodily functions (4 examples)

Example 6, bodily functions - too many bananas

- 1 Lah17: another example, of Samuel Beckett in a play, # Samuel Beckett in a play called #
- 2 La Dernière Bande which is translated fetchingly as Krapp's Last Tape, # , so # La
- 3 Dernière Bande, # where the character # basically is suffering from # constipation
- 4 because he's eaten too many bananas,
- 5 SS: <laughter>
- 6 Lah17: # , so # what's this got to do with real life well it's it's just a a kind of escape isn't it

(ahlct017)



### Example 24, bodily functions - urine

- 1 Lls26: also remember to, start getting in the habit of using urine, and filtrate in the right, #  
2 context, urine is only urine  
3 SS: <laughter>

(lslct026)

- Alcohol (3 examples)

### Example 25, alcohol - Whisky

- 1 Lah17: sometimes when we're writing assignments we think you know # what's the point  
2 of all this # so what you do is to get the whisky bottle out and have another drink  
3 don't you  
4 SS: <laughter>

(ahlct017)

- Vulnerable people (3 examples)

### Example 26, vulnerable people - fat people

- 1 Lss38: we'll talk about political correctness again in a moment but, # , at one time, people  
2 could be described as fat, but that is considered offensive, now so, peop- , you use  
3 words like # , well chunky, <laughter> , and # , have you heard of, # it's a bit of a  
4 joke but things like horizontally challenged,  
5 SS: <laughter>  
6 Lss38: or circumferentially, challenged  
7 SL: <laughter>  
8 Lss38: # , ways to get round saying that somebody is fat

(sslct038)

- Death (2 examples)

Example 27, death - dead child

- 1 Lah36: yeah I know but if you're a novice you'll be thinking oh right # child right, clutch
- 2 down, brake hard splat <laughter>
- 3 S: (inaudible)
- 4 Lah36: dead child <laughter>, yes <laughter>

(ahlct036)

The above examples indicate a range of topics which are evaluated as taboo topics in British society, and hence reflect sociocultural stance to these topics (of course, these topics may well be taboos in other societies). It is not surprising that evaluation varies socioculturally (cf. Hunston and Thompson, 2000:21). Cortazzi and Jin (2000:111-114) discuss in detail the cultural variances of evaluation of narratives. An interesting cross-cultural study of evaluation is Precht (2003), in which the author compares the frequencies of stance markers in two conversational corpora in Britain and America. The results show that in work contexts, the American corpus contains more modal verbs like 'want' and 'need', whereas the British corpus includes more evidential markers such as 'know' and 'maybe'; in informal contexts, many more affect markers, such as 'love' and 'crazy', appear in the former corpus than the latter. It can be expected that stance in humour, especially when sociocultural allusions are involved, is problematic for international students in British universities. Can they comprehend the implied stance in their lecturers' humour? Do they have enough sociocultural knowledge to understand the stance? Do they feel excluded if they misunderstand the stance? All these questions will be explored in my fieldwork study with the Chinese students as documented in Chapter 6.

#### **4.3.4. Incongruity - an essential characteristic of humour in BASE**

Ritchie (2004:46) claims that '[if] there is one generalisation that can be extracted from the literature about humour, it is that humour involves incongruity'. A brief introduction to incongruity theories of humour is included in §2.2.1. In linguistics, the script theory of humour foregrounds the switch between two incongruous scripts. A script is 'a large chunk of semantic information surrounding the word or evoked by it' (Raskin, 1985:81) (also see §2.4.3). However, as the examples in the prior sections show, humour cannot always be reduced to certain words or phrases. Incongruity arises across all the dimensions of humour discussed above. The analysis of the BASE data shows that humour in any HE cannot be fully explained without referring to one or more incongruous features. In this respect, incongruity is an essential characteristic of humour.

At word level, word play embraces two meanings of a word/sound. For example, 'top' in Example 1; 'chunnel' in Example 2. At textual level, a quip is inserted in the ongoing primary speech flow, and conveys meaning that is not always relevant to what is involved in the primary flow, such as the remark on 'split-split plot' in Example 8. At the paralinguistic level, accents bear rich sociocultural and geographical information, and a lecturer's change of accent activates a new series of scripts. This can be seen, for instance, in Example 4, in which the lecturer puts on a different voice mocking the row between Sainsbury's and Tesco. Alternative realities, a property of humour in the semantic dimension, are strongly associated with incongruity, and this is triggered by a mixture of formal and functional properties of a humorous utterance (see §4.3.2). Incongruity may also occur at a functional level, with the paradoxical quality of face acts and the co-existence of opposing stances in irony being exemplars (for instance, Examples 15 'glasses on and off' and 23 'things giving you happiness'). Incongruity also manifests itself in the

interplay between the various dimensions/properties of humour and the context of an academic lecture. The BASE data shows that lectures are subject to register humour (see §4.3.1). Informal register in the lecturer's utterance, such as swear words, is likely to generate humour, such as Example 4 'Sainsbury's and Tesco'. In the Small Corpus, there are also examples of inappropriate paralanguage, in which the lecturer, Andy, whistles in class.

## **4.4 Summary and conclusion**

In this chapter, 'laughter' tags (LTs) are used as a convenient index of humour, drawn on to investigate potential distributive patterns within BASE. On average, there are nearly two 'laughter'/'laugh' tags per 10 minutes of the lecture time, but since humour without laughter is not identified in BASE, humour may be more common than suggested by the incidence of laughter. It is clear that LTs distribute highly unevenly across the BASE lectures, but I was unable to reliably identify any disciplinary effect in the distribution of LTs. Student level may have considerable bearing on the occurrence of laughter, but a definite conclusion cannot be drawn due to the limited resources in BASE. However, the quantitative analysis shows that humour seems to be associated closely with the teaching style of particular lecturers. I explore this point further in relation to the Small Corpus (§5.1), as the data here provide more paralinguistic and contextual information for the close investigation of individual lecturers' use of humour.

The qualitative analysis of the BASE data as elaborated in §4.3 produced an analytical framework incorporating three broad dimensions of humour in the BASE data. Adopting this framework, I identified features that are more, or less common in BASE. The study of the Small Corpus data discussed in Chapter 5 will focus on the common features of

humour identified in BASE. In the formal dimension, stories/anecdotes and quips are frequent forms of humour in BASE, whereas word play and jokes only occur sparsely. Invoking alternative realities is an important semantic property of humour in the BASE data. This property is conducive to incongruity, an essential characteristic of humour. Humour in any HE cannot be fully explained without referring to one or more incongruous features. In the functional dimension, interpersonal functions of humour are frequent. Analysis of the HEs reveals that humour is a versatile means of enhancing self-image, tackling potential face loss, mitigating FTAs, and enhancing solidarity with students. Teasing targeted at others and oneself is ubiquitous in the BASE data. This type of humour 'bites' and 'bonds' at the same time. The interpersonal functions of humour are also salient in that humour draws attention to stance of language. Stance in humour is often implicitly expressed, and reflects the speaker's and listeners' shared awareness of the implied meaning. Moreover, as stance in humour often reflects sociocultural values, especially those involving taboo topics, it also indicates the speaker's and listeners' shared awareness of these sociocultural values. In this sense, understanding of stance in humour may contribute to in-group positive face (§2.4.2).

Some qualities of humour identified in the BASE data may be particularly problematic to Chinese students in British universities. I have pointed out in §4.3.3 that teasing, self-deprecation, and understanding sociocultural stance alluded to in humour are among these problems. In addition, in instances such as Example 10 'dysfunctional families', understanding the implied stance to a doctor's use of 'dysfunction' when explaining 'failure' to a patient needs sociocultural knowledge and skills of distinguishing accents (see §4.3.3). This can also be difficult for international students. My analysis in Chapter 5 will also focus on these aspects.

Finally, at the start of the thesis, I noted that my study adopts an inductive approach to defining humour: instead of developing an *a priori* definition, I set up rules for identifying instances of humour in my data (see §1.2). It is necessary to summarise here, before moving on to the Small Corpus data in Chapter 5, how the rules for identifying instances of humour have been developed in this thesis so far. I started the discussion on humour in this thesis by referring to Holmes' (2000) definition of humour. In Chapter 3, I elaborated on the procedures and rules of how I identified humour in my data. The large amount of data in BASE gave rise to some significant qualities of what have been identified as humour. Below I present a characterisation of humour in BASE on the basis of my analysis in this chapter.

- Humour in my study is represented by humour episodes (HEs) identified in the BASE corpus. They are the lecturers' utterances identified by me based on lexical, textual, paralinguistic, and discoursal cues as perceived to be amusing by myself and/or at least some participants in the lectures.
- All HEs in BASE incorporate the interplay between incongruous formal, semantic, and/or functional properties, and between the properties and the institutional context of a lecture.
- Humour in the lectures serves important interpersonal functions. It is used to carry out relational activities, in which the lecturers improve self-image, tackle critical moments of face loss, mitigate FTAs, and develop and maintain rapport with the students. Face acts and expression of stance are two important concepts in the functional analysis of humour in the lectures.

As will be seen in Chapter 5, new functions of humour are identified in the Small Corpus

data. These functions will then be fed into the above characterisation. The final refined characterisation of humour in my study will be presented in §7.2.1 in the final chapter of the thesis.





## 5. Humour in the Small Corpus

This chapter explores how humour functions in the nine lectures recorded in the Small Corpus of humour in lectures. It starts with a brief review of some potential macro patterns of the HEs identified in these lectures, and then moves on to the analysis of the functions of the humour. As explained in §3.4.1, the Small Corpus data allows analysis in some ways that cannot be carried out with the BASE data. The BASE data lacks contextual information. Also, as the analyst, I was not present at any of the lectures and had no access to any participants' accounts of the humour. These issues were addressed in the development of the Small Corpus, as I attended and recorded the lectures, and talked to the lecturers and some of the students (see §3.3). The functional analysis of the Small Corpus data is therefore enriched by contextual knowledge, and supplemented by the participants' accounts. Nonetheless, the analysis of the BASE data makes important contribution to that of the Small Corpus. The former chapter gave rise to some important formal, semantic, and functional properties and recurrent characteristics of humour, together with some useful terms and concepts. These will be constantly referred to in the analysis in §5.2-4 (for further discussion of the triangulation of the two corpora see §3.4.1).

Some functions of humour have emerged in the Small Corpus that are not salient in the BASE data, e.g. humour as breaks in lectures (§5.4). Furthermore, as introduced at the beginning of §4.3.3, humour in the lectures facilitates both interpersonal activities and teaching and learning. The latter activities are the primary tasks in lectures. Humour's task-based features in lectures could not be studied qualitatively in BASE (see §4.3.3), but as shown in §5.2-4, the lecturers' reflections on their use of humour foreground these features. Meanwhile, universities as social organisations render lectures as one of the interactional

contexts for lecturers and students. The analysis in this chapter shows that humour in the nine lectures functions in a wide variety of ways to facilitate teaching and socialising in lectures. However, humour episodes (HEs), like all other utterances, are multi-functional (Holmes, 2000:166). Although I make an effort to reflect the various functions of humour in my analysis, emphasis is placed on the one that is presently being discussed. In this chapter, I also hypothesise the potential issues that a Chinese student may have understanding specific HEs.

## **5.1 The big picture of the nine lectures**

### **5.1.1. Macro patterns of the HEs**

In this section, HEs are used in the quantification as representations of humour in the Small Corpus. Nevertheless, the relationship between HEs and humour needs to be assessed critically (see §3.4.2). Furthermore, the limited amount of data in the Small Corpus restricts the generalisability of any patterns emerging from it. Bearing these issues in mind, I emphasise that the major purpose of this section is to help build contextual background knowledge of what happened in the lectures, and facilitate the qualitative analysis in the later sections in this chapter. I start by examining the quantity and frequency of the HEs in the nine lectures. Then I try to describe the lecturing styles of the lecturers in the Small Corpus.

Figure 5.1, generated in Excel, demonstrates the temporal distribution of HEs in each part of the lectures. Each vertical block **I** represents one emergence of HE on the timeline. It should be noted that Figure 5.1 does not embody the length of the HEs, which varies from about 20 seconds to four and a half minutes. Therefore, Figure 5.1 is not a precise representation of the temporal properties, such as time loci and boundaries, of the HEs, but

rather their relative positions in the lectures. An initial observation shows that humour occurs in the first five minutes of many parts<sup>35</sup> of the lectures. Moreover, clusters of HEs are evident in Andy's lectures (a cluster of HEs can be perceived in Figure 5.1 as a series of adjacent blocks), whereas in most other lectures, the HEs are more sporadic. This pattern is, of course, a result of how HEs were defined and segmented: successive cues of humour were not divided until there was a topic shift or change of class events (class events are the underlying events and activities being carried out in the classroom; they will be explained further below); Andy's lectures were so interactive that his HEs were also divided according to shifts of audience whom he was directly addressing (for a detailed explanation of segmenting HEs see §3.4.2). This pattern reflects the permeation of humour that is unique in Andy's lectures.

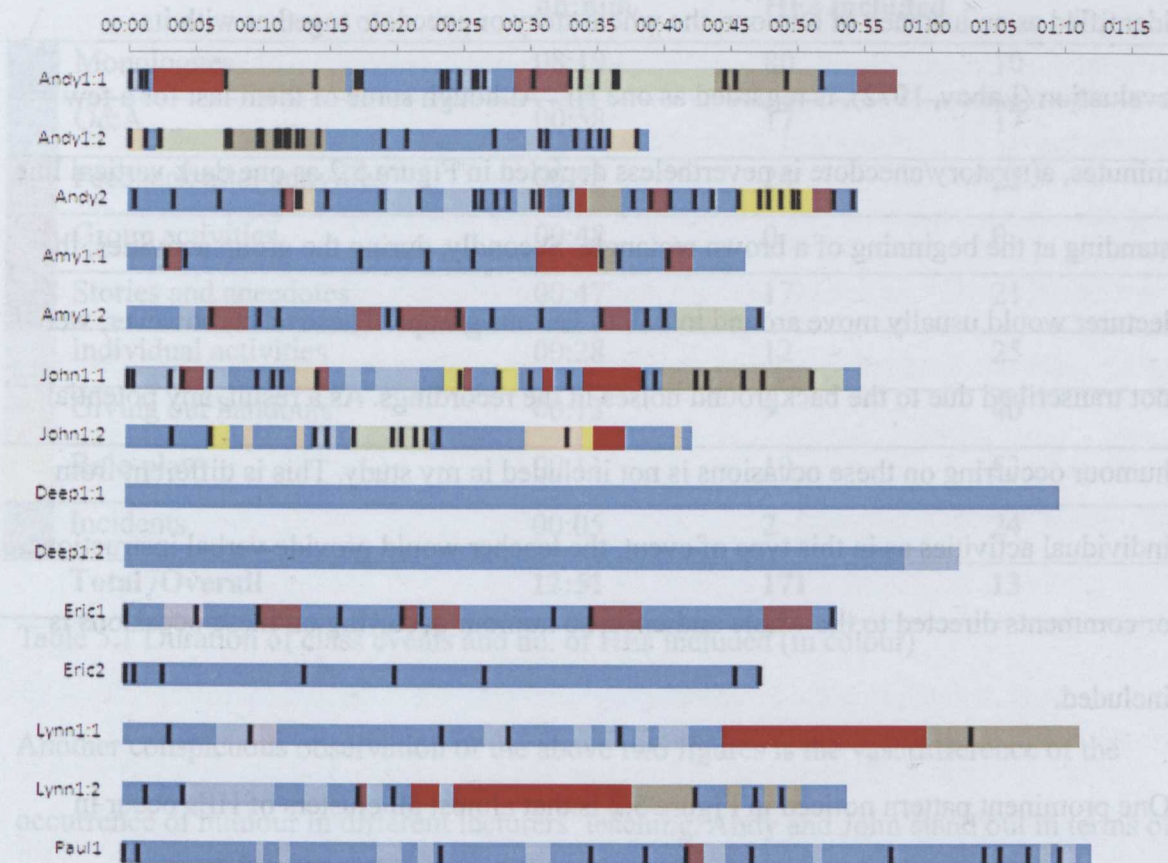
The audio files of all the nine lectures were listened to, during which notes were made to mark down the underlying events and activities. The notes were then compared, revised and finalised. Eventually nine class events were identified. These categories are not mutually exclusive. By adding the class events - represented by colour blocks - to the time plot of HEs (Figure 5.1), the relationship between the two can be perceived in Figure 5.2. I have explained earlier that the major purpose of this section is to help build contextual background knowledge of what happened in the lectures, and facilitate the qualitative analysis in the later sections of this chapter. Figures 5.1 and 5.2 serve this purpose, and the ways humour is represented and quantified in them present certain limitations. I have explained the limitations of Figure 5.1 above. In the next paragraph, I explain those of Figure 5.2.

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<sup>35</sup> Some lectures are divided into two parts with a short break in between.



Figure 5.2 HEs and class events (in colour)



■ Occurrence of a humour episode

#### Events involving mainly one speaker:

Monologues - the lecturer (L) is the sole speaker; L may ask a question and receive several brief responses from the students (SS), but he/she remains the dominant speaker. Stories and anecdotes are not included in this category.

Stories and anecdotes - L tells narratives which match Toolan's (2006:54) characterisation as introduced in §4.3.1.

Individual activities - SS are engaged in independent reading, writing, or listening to tapes. L delivers instructions or comments addressing to the whole audience.

#### Events involving interactions between SS and L, or SS themselves:

Group activities - SS are engaged in group discussions or role-play activities.

Feedback after activities - SS share feedback after group or individual activities; L listens and makes comments, or sometimes writes on the whiteboard.

Giving out handouts - L circulates handouts to SS.

Role-play - collaborative acting-out of a scenario by L and one or a few S/SS, or by two Ls.

Q&A - L asks questions and SS response, or vice versa; SS make more than two responses, and sometimes the communication becomes more like a symmetrical conversation.

#### Incidents:

In Eric1, the computer stops working for a short while, and L spends sometime dealing with the incidents. In Lynn 1:1, a group of students arrive late, which briefly interrupts the lecture.



Two points should be noted here. Firstly, as explained in §3.4.2, if a story or an anecdote is identified as an instance of humour, the whole story or anecdote together with its evaluation (Labov, 1972), is regarded as one HE. Although some of them last for a few minutes, a(n) story/anecdote is nevertheless depicted in Figure 5.2 as one dark vertical line standing at the beginning of a brown rectangle. Secondly, during the group activities, the lecturer would usually move around to talk to various groups. These talks, however, were not transcribed due to the background noises in the recordings. As a result, any potential humour occurring on these occasions is not included in my study. This is different from individual activities as in this type of event, the teacher would provide verbal instructions or comments directed to the whole audience, so humour occurring on these occasions is included.

One prominent pattern noticed in Figure 5.2 is that almost all clusters of HEs occur in interactive class events (Q&A, feedback after activities, and role-play). This discovery can be also seen in Table 5.1 below, which summarises the duration of the class events and the number of HEs they contain. It can be seen that monologues, as the most typical event in academic lectures, dominate the lectures in the Small Corpus. Nevertheless, humour is much less frequent in monologues as compared to other types of class events. This is in marked contrast to role-play and giving out handouts, both of which only happen for a very short time in the lectures, but are filled with HEs. This suggests that in the lectures, interaction is more conducive to humour than monologues, which is in line with the discussion in §4.1.1 that laughter is more prevalent in interactive contexts. In addition, humour is also frequent in story/anecdote-telling events. This echoes the finding in Chapter 4 that humour in BASE often takes the form of stories/anecdotes (§4.3.1 ‘text level’).

Class events	Duration hh:mm	Total no. of HEs included	HEs per hour
Monologues	08:19	80	10
Q&A	00:58	17	17
Feedback after activities	00:58	24	25
Group activities	00:48	0	0
Stories and anecdotes	00:47	17	21
Individual activities	00:28	12	25
Giving out handouts	00:13	9	40
Role-play	00:11	10	53
Incidents	00:05	2	24
<b>Total /Overall</b>	<b>12:51</b>	<b>171</b>	<b>13</b>

Table 5.1 Duration of class events and no. of HEs included (in colour)

Another conspicuous observation of the above two figures is the vast difference of the occurrence of humour in different lecturers' teaching. Andy and John stand out in terms of the numbers of HEs in their lectures. This needs to be attributed, at least partly, to the fact that their lectures have more interactive events, and clusters of HEs often reside in these events. In contrast to these two lecturers, Deep produces no HEs in his lecture, which is over two-hour long and predominately monologic. But if we look at Andy's monologues, they are still rich in HEs. The differences between individuals indicate the strong influence of the lecturers' idiosyncrasies on the occurrence of humour. This coincides with the speculation arising from the BASE data as documented in §4.1.2. To sum up, the lecturers in the Small Corpus vary considerably in their uses of humour; this is reflected in the types of class events involved in the lecturers' teaching, how interactive it is, and whether humour occurs in their monologic speech.

### 5.1.2. Portraying the lecturing styles

To better demonstrate the differences between the seven lecturers, I will portray in the section below their lecturing styles addressing the aspects mentioned in the prior section together with my observations in the classes and interviews. Both the BASE data and my own data show that the use of humour varies largely between lecturers. The characteristics of the individual lecturer's lecturing style will be taken into consideration in the selection of HEs in the playback and discussion sessions with students (see the discussion of how the HEs were selected in §3.3.2).

#### Andy

Humour was abundant in Andy's lectures. He had a lively lecturing style - he spoke fast, laughing and moving around the classroom often; sometimes he even hummed and whistled in class; he constantly invited the students' participation in raising questions, group discussions, and role-play. As seen in Figure 5.2, humour often occurred when he was giving out handouts, or reading out some slides or handouts (see examples in §3.4.2). This seldom happened in other lectures. This was because he circulated his handouts to the students personally during the lectures. As for most of the other lecturers, they left the handouts somewhere in the classroom for the students to collect before class. Andy's lecturing style might be better explained in his own words:

I interact with the students [...] I interact with the um materials as well [... it's like] inside my head, I have these voices these people emerged [...] and even in lectures that comes out, it's kind of an internal dialogue, and when that voice comes out, it just comes out, and I could stop it [...] but in a lecture, if you like, what I am doing is kind of opening myself

According to Andy, he was being himself in lectures, and would share his 'internal



dialogues' with his students. This account to a certain degree matched my perception of Andy outside the classroom, e.g. in the interviews, in which he was often joking and thinking aloud. His 'usual' way of speaking, as we have seen, tended to generate humour. In fact, the non-humour gaps in his lectures often involved the students' independent activities in which the teacher was not supposed to talk. In this sense, it might be proposed that humour was the default property of Andy's lecturing style; he was inclined to produce humour in almost all kinds of conditions.

## **Amy**

Amy lectured in a calm manner. She spoke slowly as compared to Andy, and was praised by several Chinese students for having clear pronunciation. Most of the time in her lecture, she was the only speaker, but she also allowed time for group activities and the students' questions. Many of the students I talked to in her class remarked that her teaching was very clearly structured. Amy told me that she made detailed lesson plans, which would sometimes include humour such as interesting stories/anecdotes. Moreover, in her lecture, she told many anecdotes about her childhood. This was a significant feature of her lecturing style. She remarked in the interview on why she told an anecdote:

I think there are a couple of reasons why I use the story, one is that I think urm I think students in particular are always interested, you know a bit more about the teachers I suppose, so, so I think revealing something about yourself as a child, or your personal life or whatever can immediately attract their attention, so that you know they are listening, I think they are always interested in a bit more about you, but also then from a sort of teaching point of view I always find that, telling stories is a very useful way of trying to illustrate theory rather than explaining the theory just in the abstract, if you can then link that to a story that illustrate that point, I think that can be very helpful

Therefore, Amy was in her own view consciously using personal anecdotes to draw the

interest of her students and illustrate teaching points. This gave an impression that Amy's humour in lectures is well-planned and purposeful.

## **John**

Apart from Andy, John was another lecturer whose lecture was rich in humour. But he did not speak as fast as Andy, and nor did he often think aloud, or hum or whistle in lectures. John made use of a lot of teaching materials such as tapes and video clips, and this often generated laughter. The cluster of HEs in John1:2 was one example, in which he played a tape to the class of a conversation between him and his son. He paused the tape from time to time to make brief comments about the conversation, which brought bouts of laughter. Nevertheless, two Chinese students I talked to in his lecture mentioned that his uses of tapes and video clips sometimes could be overwhelming and distracting. John also used a lot of role-play in his teaching, in which usually he picked a nearby student to start a conversation in an imagined scenario. Such role-play was also prone to humour.

## **Deep**

Deep spoke slowly in lectures, and like Amy, his clear pronunciation was also appreciated by some of his students. He was usually the only speaker in his lecture, but from time to time he asked the students to raise questions or make comments. However, the students' responses were usually scarce. A few Chinese students in his class praised his well-prepared PowerPoint slides and handouts. However, I could not identify any instances of humour in Deep's lecture, but there were several occasions when he laughed at what he was saying, e.g.

1 Deep: Also finally in Japan, um if you look at the top people in Japanese companies senior

2 managers, they are, all managers, who, have worked for that company all their life,  
3 you know they've been loyal to that company they come up through, um promotions  
4 to senior positions, and also, these company men these loyal company men or,  
5 women, um <laughing voice> tend to be </> # mostly men, um, these people, don't  
6 have any outside or overlapping directorships

Deep1

There were no clear cues of humour apart from Deep's mild laugh in the above example. Also, in the interview, Deep expressed the view that he was not trying to be humorous in class. For these reasons, I did not classify the instances like the one above as HEs. One interesting point about Deep was that, when I interviewed several of his students, none but one referred to him as a humorous person. The exception was a part-time student who also worked in the same department as Deep. She mentioned that, based on her personal contact with Deep, he seemed to have a dry sense of humour.

## **Eric**

Eric was an experienced lecturer, and was near his retirement at the time. As he said in the interview, he had been teaching the same course for a long time, and hence was very familiar with the materials. He also seemed to be familiar with his students, as he could address many of them by name, and even recalled their anecdotes in the interviews. Eric encouraged his students to make comments at anytime during his lectures. Some of his students would interrupt him to raise questions, but most of the time Eric's lectures were monologic. He showed bullet-points in his PowerPoint slides and injected a lot of examples into the lectures to explain them. One significant feature of his lecturing was his frequent use of real cases and personal experiences in business and industry to illustrate his teaching points. This impressed some of my student participants who saw it as a merit of

his teaching. Another key feature of Eric's lecturing style in relation to humour was that he often teased the students or deprecated himself. There were 13 HEs in total in his two lectures which contained such face act humour, and he always did so with little marked paralanguage. I will discuss this further in §5.3.

## **Lynn**

Like Eric, Lynn welcomed interruptions from her students in class. But she did not seem to be very acquainted with them, as she often could not remember their names, and admitted that she did not well recognise most of their faces. This was probably because Lynn was a part-time lecturer (all the other lecturers in my research were full-time). In class, she constantly raised questions and expected the students to give short answers. Several of her students were active in responding, although the majority remained very quiet throughout the lectures. Both parts of Lynn's lecture had a long session of group discussion, during which she walked around to talk to different groups. She illustrated her teaching with many everyday examples in business, especially during the feedback sessions after the group discussions. But usually they were provided as short examples rather than complete and extended stories.

## **Paul**

Paul spoke quietly as compared to the other lecturers in my research, and seldom changed his position in the classroom throughout a lecture. He was almost always the sole speaker in the lecture: over 80% of his lecture time was monologic, which was the highest apart from Eric<sup>2</sup> (monologic throughout). He had a habit of saying 'yeah' in a rising tone at the end of an utterance as if seeking for agreement. But usually he would carry on speaking without any of the students' responses. Occasionally, Paul asked questions, and the

students would make short comments. He also talked about examples in business and industry, but seldom injected any personal experiences into his teaching.

In the sections below, I will discuss the major functions of humour in the Small Corpus with examples.

## **5.2 Humour as a teaching tool**

As introduced at the beginning of §4.3.3, humour in lectures is interpersonal and task-oriented. Numerous studies have elaborated on the interpersonal functions of humour including Holmes (Holmes, 2000, 2006b, 2007; Holmes and Marra, 2002a, 2002b; Holmes and Stubbe, 2003), Boxer and Cortés-Conde (1997) and Norrick (1993). As for its task-oriented functions, some quantitative studies address humour's functions of this type in the classroom with minimal qualitative insight (see §2.3.4 and §4.3.3). In applied linguistics, the pedagogical implications of humour for language learning has been acknowledged by scholars such as Bell (Bell, 2005, 2007a, 2009b; Pomerantz and Bell, 2007), Cook (2000), Deneire (1995), and Schmitz (2002), and several teachers' handbooks recommend means of integrating humour in teaching (Medgyes (2002) on language classrooms; Morrison (2008) on children's classrooms in general). Nonetheless, only a small number of scholars, e.g. Appel (2007), Bell (2005, 2009b) and Forman (2011), have conducted qualitative examinations of the use of humour in education. Some recent reviews of studies on humour and language learning include Wagner and Urios-Aparisi (2008) and Ziyaemehr et al. (2011). On humour in the work place, Holmes (2007) also draws attention to its under-researched task-based functions, and shows with data how humour in business meetings helps to achieve objectives. In many of the HEs in the Small Corpus, humour is strongly task-orientated, and the lecturers' reflections on their use of humour foreground

this feature. I suggest that humour is a teaching tool in the lectures.

### **5.2.1. Stories and anecdotes**

The BASE data (§4.3.1) and the Small Corpus (§5.1.1) both show that stories and anecdotes are a frequent structure of humour. In the latter data set, both Amy and Eric frequently incorporate stories and anecdotes into their lectures. The analysis of the discourse, as confirmed by the lecturers, shows that these narratives are usually told to illustrate an idea or a concept that is being taught; they are often planned and repeated; some are expected to trigger laughter in the audience. Two examples are included below. Extract 1 contains a humorous anecdote told by Amy. The analysis will show that its humour is well planned and not pragmatically implied (§2.4.1). It is well received, and in many ways an example of successful humour in the Small Corpus. For this reason, it is presented as the first extract in this chapter. Extract 2 is by Eric. Unlike Extract 1, Eric's anecdote alludes to sociocultural values which may not be accessible to Chinese students. The juxtaposition of the two extracts will appear again in Chapter 6 of the student data to display how they are perceived differently by the participants.

#### **Extract 1 - a strong form of integrative motivation**

Lecturer:	Amy
Module:	Psychology of language classroom practices
Lecture title:	Autonomy & motivation
Student level:	MA

1 Amy: a very strong form of integrative motivation obviously is to fall in love,

2 with someone who speaks that language

3 SS: <laughter>

4 Amy: Cuz clearly then, you'll be very motivated, to master the language

5 SS: <laughter>

6 Amy: because you very much want to share your life with that person

7 SM: (inaudible)

8 SS: [<laughter>

9 Amy: [And yeah <laughter> I am not sure if anyone's speaking from experience here

10 SS: <laughter>

11 Amy: And it's quite interesting in the 1970s there was, a sort of, urm series of

12 research case studies done called good language learners studies in Canada and

13 they had these case studies of very successful language learners and there was one

14 particular case I remember I can't remember the name of the participant, but it

15 was a he, a man of course and he was multi-lingual he has mastered many

16 languages and when they investigated his case so they discovered that he had had

17 a native speaker girlfriend for every language [that he mastered

18 SS: [<laughter>

19 Amy: So clearly it shows that yes this strong form of integrative motivation can

20 work very well, but, and the problem was that this particular tradition of research

21 didn't really have very practical advice for teachers, cuz there's not much there

22 to say to students okay well find a native speaker [girlfriend or boyfriend you know

23 SS: [<laughter>

24 Amy: It doesn't really translate into any suggestions of what teachers can do, and

25 so this whole tradition which was very active for thirty years or so, urm it was very

26 theoretical it was theoretical urm sort of tradition and it suggested that integrative

27 motivation give, leads to successful learning but it didn't really have any practical

In this extract, Amy has just finished explaining the concept of ‘integrative motivation’ in language learning, and proceeds to give an example of it. She then introduces falling in love to the students as an obvious example of integrative motivation, which instantly triggers bouts of laughter from the audience (L#3<sup>36</sup>). Shortly after, a male student (SM) sitting in the front row says something, which makes Amy and other students nearby laugh<sup>37</sup>. In response, she makes a remark suggesting that someone in the audience may have experience of falling in love with a foreign language speaker. This generates more laughter. Amy then tells a story about a Canadian man who mastered many languages because he had a native speaker girlfriend of every language he learned (#11-17). Love, or sex as it usually implies, and language learning evolve hand in hand in the story. This combination is seen as incongruous (§4.3.4), and the fact that it was researched by academics is also unexpected. Some of the student participants have accounted for the incongruity in the story:

Jian: Love seems like an informal topic to be discussed in class. However Amy used it in a proper way to illustrate what an (sic) integrative motivation was. Therefore this informal term was taken as an advantage

Chen: A man masters many languages. We thought he must be a genius or he must learn these languages very hard. However the truth is that he learnt these languages from his girlfriends. Not one or two girlfriends but many. That’s funny and unusual. Also the man

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<sup>36</sup> ‘L#’ stands for line number.

<sup>37</sup> The audio recording did not pick up what SM said, and there were disagreements between various participants regarding this. Amy, as explained in the interview, thought that the student had said ‘like me’. Three students in the research sessions recalled that what SM actually said was something like ‘ur’ or ‘hmm mm’, and Amy seemed to have misheard him.



was studied by researchers of such a theoretical field which is also funny.

RR

This incongruity triggers recurrent laughter from the audience. However, humour in the story does not only derive from the incongruity. In fact, the audience have already laughed, before the story is told, as Amy introduces falling in love as a strong form of integrative motivation, even though she delivers it without marked contextualisation cues (§3.2.2) or conspicuous violation of maxims (§2.4.1). One possible reason for the instant effect caused by the initial statement may be that, as some of my Chinese participants pointed out, love is an interesting topic to them as young people. Amy has predicted the audience's reaction to the initial statement:

That's obviously something I would have prepared, because it's an example I use each year when I explain the concept of integrative motivation, cuz I think, by talking about it in an exaggerated way like falling in love is really the best example of integrative motivation, and it makes very clear by what we mean by integrative motivation [...] I told this particular story quite a few times, I always know it does arouse laughter.

As an important function of narratives, evaluation (§2.4.4 and §4.3.3) is crucial in Amy's story. Firstly, at the beginning, 'it's quite interesting ...' signals the start of something potentially humorous. Secondly, Amy makes an evaluative aside (Labov, 1972) as she introduces the hero of the story: 'I can't remember the name of the participant, but it was a he, a man of course' (L#14-15). This signals the significance of the hero's gender in the story. Amy considered in retrospect that this aside addressed the different impressions the story would make on male and female audiences, pointing out its allusion to sex and hence repressive humour (see §4.3.3).

The fact that of course it's a man who had all these girl friends, and has mastered all these languages rather than being a female student who had lots of male friends, you see # some audience when I talked about that, that can also be humorous as well, cuz sort of the gender

and, you know assumption that yeah of course it's a guy, who's been sleeping around with lots of different women you know, <laughter>, but women also laugh I mean the female students also feel it funny, but the thing they find funny can be different, alright, it really lightened up the atmosphere <laughter>

Finally, the point of telling the story is put forward at the end (L#19-28) - on the one hand, the story exemplifies why falling in love is a strong form of integrative motivation; on the other, it brings forward the argument that research into integrative motivation lacks real implications for language teachers.

Evidence from the interview with Amy shows that humour in Extract 1 is prepared and has been rehearsed over time. It is an integral part of the teaching of 'integrative motivation'. Firstly, the best example of integrative motivation, 'falling in love', is also an extreme example. Secondly, love and learning work together in the experience of the multilingual speaker, and his experience justifies Amy's initial statement about love as the best integrative motivation; meanwhile, the somewhat ridiculous nature of the love-learning combination gives rise to Amy's concluding argument - the research tradition of integrative motivation did not supply much practical advice for teachers. In this sense, what is funny and what is being taught reside in the same subject. Finally, by telling an extreme but real story from this research tradition, humour facilitates the argument challenging the tradition by exposing its problems. This is a form of *reductio ad absurdum* argumentation.

The analysis of Extract 1 has demonstrated humour prepared by the lecturer to explain a concept and an argument. The topic she prepared is considered to be interesting by the students, and the story expresses evaluation closely connected to the teaching point. There is no pragmatic implicature (§2.4.1). In addition, the juxtaposition between love and learning can be easily understood by the audience who are English learners themselves -

this point was confirmed by my participants, and I shall explain it further in Chapter 6. To sum up, humour in Extract 1 is prepared, repeated over time, not pragmatically implied, and is likely to be easily comprehended by Chinese students. This will be further discussed in §6.1.1. However, not all humorous stories in the Small Corpus function in the same explicit way as in Extract 1. Extract 2 below is one example.

### **Extract 2 - an Englishman in a karaoke bar**

Lecturer: Eric

Module: International business

Lecture title: Culture - its influence on business

Student level: UG

- 1 Eric: I was talking to someone who was trying to do busi- well he was successfully
- 2 doing business in China, but it was the first time he's never been to China before,
- 3 he's a member of my family actually and he was in China, and he went alone and he
- 4 went to the meeting, and there was about ten people in the room which was not
- 5 what he expected, and he sat down and he made his presentation and they went no,
- 6 and they made a counter offer which was frankly ridiculous and he went, no, and
- 7 most of the day this kind of situation moves backwards and forwards really only
- 8 three people doing the talking the others are just sitting there, the second day looked
- 9 very much like the first day and he was, not understanding what was happening, not
- 10 sure what was going on, and the third day the last day he actually said, I didn't see
- 11 any point in going, I thought I might just after all go to the airport and get a plane
- 12 back it's not going to happen, but my flight was booked for the following day so hey
- 13 I went anyway, and he went in and then he, went to the same position he was in,

14 the previous day and said that's, the best we can do, and one person at the end of  
15 the table who had never spoken at all said something in Chinese and everybody  
16 relaxed everybody shook everybody else's hand everybody shook his hand the deal  
17 had been done the guy who hadn't spoken for two days was the boss, perhaps for  
18 some of you in the room that doesn't sound odd # for him this was just nothing he  
19 had met before it was a classic difference in culture, both sides were doing things  
20 as they saw and as they would do just differently  
21 the better part of the story is the manager the boss came to him afterwards shook  
22 his hand, and he thought he said, okay, and he said yes my # cousin yes and the boss  
23 said tonight, actually he hadn't said okay, what he actually said was karaoke  
24 <laugh>, and my cousin had just agreed to spend a night in a Chinese karaoke bar  
25 (I pushed) he said he will not tell me what he'd sung cuz he said he can't remember,  
26 and I believe him he probably couldn't remember he said it was a very good evening  
27 <laugh> and it's a way of doing business, which was different to that which he'd  
28 used to, he left with very fond memory he likes the place very much and he had a  
29 lot of fun with the people once the deal was done he <laughing voice>got on</> but  
30 to begin with he was completely thrown

Eric1-HE03

Cultural differences are constant resources for jokes and humour in everyday life, and hence some scholars believe that 'humour functions to expose social differences and conflicts' (Eggins and Slade, 1997:156-157). Here, Eric tells a story about a family member's experience of doing business in China, which involves going to a karaoke bar, a very popular type of entertainment in urban China. This anecdote explains vividly the subject of the lecture, culture in business. Also, Eric's topic in this extract is potentially humorous, resembling 'love' in Extract 1.

In the first half of the story, Eric has described, from his cousin's perspective, what seemed

to be a failed business negotiation. But to his surprise, the deal was made. Eric then flags up the start of what he calls 'the better part of the story' (L#21). In this better part of the story, his cousin misheard the word 'karaoke' and ended up spending a night in a Chinese karaoke bar. The switch from 'okay' to 'karaoke' is incongruous, and this should be comprehensible to the Chinese audience. Eric then makes an evaluative aside (Labov, 1972) - 'he will not tell me what he'd sung cuz he said he can't remember, and I believe him he probably couldn't remember' (L#25-26). Why his cousin could not remember what he had sung and how this remark relates to the story are implicit. This ambiguous remark violates the maxim of manner (§2.4.1), and together with Eric's laugh provides cues of humour. What Eric is implying is open to interpretation. Eric provided his own interpretation:

You should know my cousin and the idea of him in a Chinese karaoke bar is quite amusing in itself [...] that would require an understanding of English culture, urm he comes from a very close east-end family east end of London family, they are not the most cosmopolitan, and it would be a challenge to him, it will be a challenge to anybody really, but it would be a challenge to him [...]

The idea of this Englishman being dragged around to a Chinese karaoke bar and getting terribly drunk, and probably getting laughed at quite a lot is one that is easier to remember

From Eric's perspective, he is alluding to the incongruity of an east-end Englishman singing, drinking and embarrassing himself in a Chinese karaoke bar. This reflects a general attitude to karaoke in Britain - although this is a speculation based on my observation and experience - that karaoke singing is usually associated with embarrassment; it is usually done in pubs or restaurants; people enjoy drinking and getting drunk; they make themselves drunk so as to be brave enough to sing. As such, what Eric's cousin did in the Chinese karaoke bar was amusing. The Chinese attitude to karaoke is very different (again, this is my speculation): in urban China, karaoke is a very popular and ordinary entertainment; people enjoy singing in karaoke bars, and they may drink alcohol

to enhance the enjoyment. With this account, Eric's stance in the story may be especially problematic to Chinese students as they do not usually associate karaoke with embarrassment based on their cultural knowledge. If this happens, the humour regarding the Englishman's experience in a Chinese karaoke bar will fall flat for Chinese students. I will explore this potential issue in Chapter 6.

### **5.2.2. Role-play**

I discussed in §4.3.2 that role-play as an exemplar of keying alternative realities may create a potential for humour. In this section, I will demonstrate with Extract 3 that role-play in the lectures is task-oriented. This extract is from John, whose lecturing style is characteristic of the use of role-play (see §5.1.2).

#### **Extract 3 - a telephone conversation**

Lecturer: John

Module: Introduction to ELT (English Language Teaching)

Lecture title: Speaking

Student level: MA

John has previously mentioned in the same lecture that some girls would use hair-washing as an excuse to politely reject a date request.

- 1 John: Opening gambits, closing gambits, that's quite difficult you know if you think
- 2 how complicated that it is to finish, even a telephone conversation, let's imagine,
- 3 that I am going to meet Becky tonight okay? So we have a telephone conversation,
- 4 can we meet at five o'clock tonight or this afternoon
- 5 Becky: sorry I need to wash my hair

6 SS: SS: [<laughter>  
7 John: [Oh <laughter> <laughing voice> you need to wash your hair </>  
8 <laughter> I want you to accept this time # it's a tutorial so can we meet for a  
9 tutorial at five o'clock  
10 Becky: ur yes  
11 John: Okay then good, right then so five o'clock tonight then  
12 Becky: ur okay see you  
13 John: Yeah see you bye bye  
14 Becky: bye bye  
15 John: Okay, so that's quite complicated because, five o'clock is that okay yeah good  
16 see you then yeah see you bye bye, but, if I, let's try it again, can we meet at five  
17 o'clock tonight? <in low voice to Becky> yes </>  
18 Becky: ur yes  
19 John: Okay bye  
20 SS: <laughter>  
21 John: It's a bit rude isn't it it seems a bit abrupt, so, it's quite skilful to manage  
22 entering and leaving

John1-HE11

In this extract, John wants to show that entering and leaving a telephone conversation is more difficult than it seems, so he picks a nearby student Becky to role-play a telephone talk, in which he proposes meeting her. An alternative reality (§4.3.2) is hence initiated. Becky then replies using a phrase she learnt not long before as a polite rejection (L#5). This generates laughter from the audience and John himself. However, her answer is obviously not what John has expected, as he has to suspend the alternative reality to prompt her in L#8-9. John explained why he did so in the interview:

She didn't have to say anything very much just # I was doing all the [opening and ending], all she had to do was to say see you or something like that

As John adjusts and specifies the content of the scenario, Becky changes her answer and completes the conversation with John. Shortly afterwards, John invites Becky to do a second role-play (L#16-9). It is meant to contrast with the first one to illustrate an abrupt ending of a telephone conversation. John prompts Becky again but quietly, and she reacts as required, allowing John to act out the abrupt ending, which is humorous and generates laughter.

The analysis of Extract 3 shows that the role-play is task-oriented. The acting is first of all restricted by the purpose of the teaching. When a student is picked to collaborate with the lecturer, there are initial inconsistencies between the keyings (§4.3.2) perceived by the two sides. John's keying of the role-play is opening and ending a telephone conversation, whereas Becky's may be rejecting a request politely. As they proceed to negotiate and converge, incongruous exchanges emerge. Extract 3 demonstrates again that role-play creates a potential for humour, and this feature can be made use of by a lecturer to enhance teaching. This is supported by John's comment below, in which he suggested that different expectations and surprises arising from a role-play make it an effective and memorable way of teaching:

I could do [the scenario] by myself, but it wouldn't be very effective or memorable, so I think it is quite good to-, when you need a dialogue, or when you need a conversation to involve a student, also, you know it's kind of ur, I guess people will then, oh what's he doing now, or what's she going to do

### **5.3 Humour as interpersonal strategies**

The analysis in Chapter 4 has shown that humour in the BASE lectures serves a variety of



interpersonal functions. Humour in the Small Corpus also displays this feature. The lecturers in the Small Corpus use humour to perform face threatening acts (FTAs) (see §2.4.2), to enhance rapport with the students, to encourage their active engagement, and meanwhile maintain control over the interaction. These uses of humour can be considered interpersonal strategies in class. I will start the discussion with the lecturers' self-deprecation and teasing the students, which are expected to be more risky when international students are involved (§4.3.3). Extract 4 is an example of self-deprecation. In Extract 5, the lecturer teases the students. Both examples are from Eric's lectures. This is because, as pointed out in §5.1.2, humour in Eric's lectures is predominately of these types.

### **5.3.1. Self-deprecating humour**

#### **Extract 4 - good news and better news**

Lecturer: Eric

Module: International business

Lecture title: Eclectic theory & critique of diamond theory

Student level: UG

This extract happens at the beginning of the lecture. Carla is a lecturer in the same department as Eric.

- 1 Eric: Some of you might have been thinking it was Carla this morning on, Economics,
- 2 well the good news is, you get Carla next week, and the better news is, ready for
- 3 the- I will listen for the cheers, this is the last formal lecture you get from me on this
- 4 subject
- 5 SF: woo-hoo::
- 6 Eric: You cheered

- 7 SL: [<laughter>  
8 SF: [(inaudible)  
9 Eric: Oh dear <clears throat>  
10 S?: (inaudible)  
11 Eric: black mark? you're joking, that's twenty percent off her essay  
12 SF: [oh::  
13 SS: [<laughter>  
14 Eric: <laugh> # five percent for optimism <laugh> right okay

Eric2-HE02

In this extract, Eric announces mainly two messages - Carla is teaching next week, and this is his last lecture. He introduces these messages as 'good news' and even 'better news' (L#2). Why it is good news is not clearly explained - that is, the maxim of manner is violated (§2.4.1). But through the juxtaposition of his exit with a new lecturer's arrival, one can infer that Eric is suggesting that the students do not like his lectures. As such, a self-deprecating evaluation of his level of popularity with the students arises. The violation of manner also signals a play frame (§2.4.1; §4.3.3). Eric then invites the students to participate in the play frame ('I will listen for the cheers' in L#3). This is immediately picked up by one British female student SF, who then responds to him by cheering. The British student SF plays along, which triggers laughter from the audience. Soon afterwards, other students join in. Someone may have suggested giving SF a black mark (L#10), but it is 'rejected' by Eric as he prefers a more serious punishment. These exchanges are all carried out in the play frame (§2.4.1; §4.3.3), and are not meant to be serious. The audience's active participation and laughter indicate that they are enjoying the game.

Eric's account of this extract in the interview also stressed its playfulness:

Laugh at me, urm, it's towards the end, there's a sense of relief that it's done, there's a sense of release of tension [...] they can laugh at me it doesn't matter, they will be happy about that [...] it's playing a game, it's just playing a game

Furthermore, in Eric's retrospective account, he depicted his awareness of using the humour for interpersonal purposes: 'they can laugh at me, they will be happy about that'. An explanation of how the humour functions interpersonally in Extract 4 is that the self-deprecation shortens the power distance between the lecturer and the students, and enhances the former's affective face (§4.3.3). In Eric's words, the students could laugh at him, subverting at least temporarily his authority. However, the self-deprecation does not necessarily undermine Eric's competence face (§4.3.3), as it is after all a game. Even if there are indeed students who dislike Eric's teaching, his oral acknowledgement of this fact serves as a kind of self-defence - he should not be accused of complacency. Nevertheless, Eric's humour in Extract 4 is not risk free. For students who cannot perceive his self-deprecation or the play frame that underlies it, they will be excluded from the game. They may end up watching the exchanges between Eric and SF like someone who knows little about football watching a crowd of fans cheering passionately.

### **5.3.2. Teasing the students**

#### **Extract 5 - the Al Yamamah deal**

Lecturer: Eric

Module: International business

Lecture title: Culture - its influence on business

Student level: UG

In the previous lecture on countertrade, Eric mentioned something called 'the Al Yamamah deal', and asked the students to investigate it after class. On the day of the current lecture,

he has a sore throat.

- 1 Eric: So, to go back to the very first lecture what is international business I am  
2 still not going to offer you a simple definition because there isn't one but I hope by  
3 now you're beginning to see what it actually is and why there is no one simple  
4 definition, at which point my voice is just about to completely disappear and you are  
5 going to tell me all the things you discovered last week about countertrade and  
6 the Al Yamamah deal <laugh> aren't you I am looking forward to this cuz then you  
7 can do the talking

Eric1-HE09

Humour in this extract resides in the last three lines. This is a typical example of irony (see §2.4.4 and §4.3.3). Some appraisal items, as classified by Martin and White (2005) (see §2.4.4), can be identified. A literal reading of the intensified graduation, i.e. gradability, (L#5: 'all the things') and expression of earnest affect (L#6: 'looking forward to') may suggest a positive view towards the students' fulfilment of the homework, but some cues of humour signal a potentially different meaning. Firstly, there is something unusual about the use of the quantifier 'all' - obviously there will not be enough time for everybody to tell everything discovered. This violates the maxim of quality (§2.4.1), and implies a meaning which is different from, and possibly opposite to, the presupposed one. Secondly, the tag question 'aren't you' (L#6) may suggest that the audience do not agree with the truth value of the proposition 'you are going to tell me [...] about countertrade and the Al Yamamah deal'; actually, tag questions are regarded as a cue of irony by Kreuz (1996). There is also a slight paralinguistic cue, i.e. Eric's laugh at L#6. With the above account, we can identify irony in Eric's utterance. The irony is formally and pragmatically flagged. By doing so, Eric's judgement is heightened on his students' fulfilment of the homework, and their willingness to talk in the seminar, which is opposite to the literal meaning. One potential

interpretation of it is: I know that you (the students) have not done much work on investigating the Al Yamamah deal, and you don't want to talk. The comprehension of such a judgement requires in-group knowledge of the students' behaviour. Eric commented on this extract himself:

There was a wind down because it was the end of the lecture, there was the oh my god he's going to ask us about the work he set us, of which about twenty five percent would have done it, I get- well you were there, urm I take a fairly hard line on that because the next time I ask them to do something I want it done, and again there's no point in shouting out at them or tearing your hair or running up and down or threatening them, that's counterproductive, but to turn around and say things like so it doesn't exist in the internet you couldn't find it, well you know I can walk to the computer in the room, put that in as a search term and a screen loads of the stuff, so I am saying to them, basically don't bullshit me, you didn't do it, I know you didn't do it, but I'll know next time as well

According to the comment above, Eric believed that he knew what his students were thinking at the end of the lecture. He was expecting that the students would be giving all sorts of excuses to explain why they had not done the homework. As such, what Eric implies in Extract 5 is threatening to the students' face (§2.4.2). Firstly, he is telling the students not to make unreasonable excuses regarding their unfulfilled task, and secondly, he is reminding, or even warning them to do their homework next time. However, these are conveyed ironically - what Eric says literally is not threatening to the students' face at all, so the FTA is off-record (§2.4.2). Furthermore, if the students understand Eric's implied judgement on their fulfilment of the homework, this understanding indicates that both parties share a common view of how students are considered to behave. Provided that the students are not offended by this implied FTA targeted at them, in-group positive face and rapport between the lecturer and students may be enhanced.

### 5.3.3. Joking about someone absent

As shown in §4.3.3, when the lecturer and the students share laughter at someone who is not present, rapport can be enhanced. In Extract 6, Lynn pokes fun at salespeople in the U.K. market. This is done as an introduction to a long group discussion, and is one of the instances in which Lynn uses everyday examples in teaching (see §5.1.2).

#### Extract 6 - sales people in the U.K.

Lecturer: Lynn

Module: Marketing communications

Student level: MBA/MSc

- 1 Lynn: so what I want you to think about sales people are not the best loved, people
- 2 in the UK market, so I want you to sort of just- consider it in just fifteen
- 3 minutes, just that I want you to think about used car sales people pension pension
- 4 pension, double glazing, people time share you might have been approached by time
- 5 share, estate agents, and what I want you to think about is to, I want you to consider
- 6 those industries and debate, this part believes that sales people are only interested in
- 7 their own gain and they're essentially unethical, do you believe that, do you agree
- 8 with that, it's only a few so-called marketing focus companies who pay lip service to
- 9 ethics and corporate social responsibility

Lynn1-HE10

In this extract, Lynn is introducing the topic for a group discussion that the students are about to undertake. As she speaks, she is constantly referring to a PowerPoint slide (Figure 5.3 below) projected on the front screen of the classroom.

## Group task 2

Salespeople are not the best-loved characters in the UK business world!

Consider the following industries:

- Used car sales
- Pensions
- Double glazing
- Time share apartments
- Estate agents

Figure 5.3 Lynn's PowerPoint slide

At the beginning of this extract, Lynn evaluates the reputation of sales people in the U.K. market. Instead of saying how much they are loved or hated, Lynn claims that they are not the best loved people. The negation here applies to the intensifier 'best', and not being the best is open to multiple interpretations (second best loved, loved, or not loved?) and is therefore ambiguous. This violates the maxim of manner (§2.4.1), and would be unnecessary if Lynn's evaluation was positive, so what is implied may be more or less derogatory of the reputation of sales people in the U.K. market. This is echoed by the exclamation mark on the PowerPoint slide, which is a visual cue of humour in text. As Lynn continues to introduce the list of industries on the PowerPoint slide one by one, her triple repetition of 'pension' stands out (L#3-4). Repetition has been widely studied in language play and creativity (Carter, 2004; Cook, 1994, 2000; Maybin and Swann, 2007a; Tannen, 1989[2007]), and is regarded as a cue of humour in my study. Following this, her change of tone when saying 'time share' (L#4) also signals something unusual.

The repetition and vocal change draw attention to the speaker's stance towards the people in question. To understand this stance, sociocultural knowledge of the sales industry in the

U.K. is required. Lynn gave a brief explanation of her stance in the interview:

I don't agree that [U.K. sales people are] all dodgy characters, but it was just sort of getting [the students] really to think about ethics and how people should behave [...] I mean in the U.K. you know people sort of think oh yeah the used car salespersons they can be a bit iffy, pensions people I've done a lot of PR about people being mis-sold pensions

Her knowledge of how sales people are viewed and behave in the U.K. underlies her critical stance towards them. It may be speculated that the repetition of 'pension' represents the ubiquity of pension-selling at work, on the media, on high streets, etc. For students who share the same knowledge, they may perceive the humour so Lynn's comment would resonate with them. In this way, the speaker and the audience would be bonded by their shared knowledge and the fresh experience of laughing together at a third party. However, such knowledge and experience are not easily available to all international students. For example, in the city I am from in China, double glazing is not a well-known industry since it is a warm place and most windows are single glazed.

#### **5.3.4. Managing interpersonal activities in long interactions**

The foregoing examples in §5.3 show how the lecturers carry out interpersonal activities with humour in monologues or short exchanges with the students. In this section, I demonstrate a long role-play activity involving Andy and some students. It generates 12 laughter tags (LTs) in total. The role-play shares similar features with those in Extract 3 (§5.2.2) in terms of the task orientation and negotiation of different keyings (§4.3.2).

During the negotiation, Andy has to constantly pose FTAs (§2.4.2) as he evaluates the students' contribution, and he deals with these humorously. Apart from mitigating the threat of the FTAs, Andy's humour in this long interaction has two other salient functions - Andy uses humour to encourage the students' active engagement in the role-play, while



also managing its development and maintaining his control over the students. These latter two functions are similar to what Holmes (2000) describes in her workplace data in which company superiors use humour to maintain power. Inviting the students' participation and controlling them are both face-threatening. Humour on this occasion releases the tension, and nurtures the rapport between the lecturer and the students. In this respect, it is an interpersonal strategy.

In Extract 7, Andy is explaining some findings of conversation analytic studies on how people break bad news. He then introduces a scenario - a teacher has to inform a student of his failed assignment, and asks his students to recommend ways to break the news. The whole role-play is long and divided into five HEs. Due to the limited space, my analysis focuses on two of the HEs (for a full version of the five HEs please see Appendix 5). As I intend to show how Andy encourages the students' participation and manages the flow of the role-play, my analysis does not cover all elements of humour in the HEs.

### **Extract 7 - how to break bad news**

- 18      SF2:    the teacher may ask some questions about your daily (reviewing) or  
19      Andy:    uh you may ask some questions, okay suppose I am getting ont-  
20                you're abso- you've got some interesting points there, when I'm actually getting to  
              tell you, and this is the interesting thing, how do I minim- suppose you haven't  
21                failed,  
22                suppose you've got a D or something you know A B C D E, suppose you've got a  
23                D, alright, what do I do to make it telling you easier, does anyone know?  
24      SF3:    urm  
25      Andy:    Sorry okay yeah #  
26      SF3:    I may, I have to explain to you that it is not my responsibility to make this

27                    decision

28     SS:        <laughter>

29     Andy:    okay

30     SF3:      so-

31     Andy:    that's a good one yeah

32     SS:        <laughter>

33     Andy:    I'm sorry, I like that yeah, this is a terrible thing, I marked your paper

34                but they MADE ME they MADE ME, AY FAIL IT FAIL IT, okay I will fail it

35     SS:        <laughter>

36     Andy:    no I know you- one thing you do is you try to distance yourself

37     SF3:      I (understand that I understand that), it's not my decision

38     Andy:    yeah

39     SF3:      it is a rule

40     Andy:    that's right, it distances you from the decision that's true, yeah

Andy2-HE24

All the students in Andy's lecture are language teachers, who are undertaking a master's course and are about to submit some assignments. Therefore, the scenario of the role-play is familiar and appeals to them. This can be seen from their keen responses. In the extract above, SF3 recommends a way of revealing the bad news to the student, in which she distances herself from the decision of the assignment result (L#26). This idea of a teacher's denying responsibility for failing an assignment that he/she has marked is somewhat unconvincing and surprising. This is probably the reason why the audience and Andy burst into laughter upon hearing SF3's idea. Before SF3 can proceed to further explain her idea, Andy makes use of the incongruity of her idea by developing it into a completely absurd scene - the paper is talking and asking the teacher to fail it. By doing so, the scenario of breaking bad news to a student, which can happen in reality, is upgraded to one in which

supernatural activities exist. In this sense, Andy recontextualises (Bauman and Briggs, 1990) SF3's original idea. This successfully enhances the momentum of laughter among the audience. As a result, he regains the floor of speech, and is able to pass it on to the next student who wants to participate. Therefore, more students can join in the role-play.

57 SF5: I # I guess maybe the teacher will ask how do you think of the-

58 Andy: That's right I might say to you, first of all, what you said I would preface it

59 with some chat, and I would sit you down, and you know <lowers voice> nice

60 weather </> whatever, and then I would # it's urm yeah it's urm and then I

61 approach it generally, <lowers voice> it's about your assignments, you know </>

62 SS: <laughter>

63 Andy: And then you know it's not going to be good, and you went OH-

Andy2-HE26

In this HE, SF5 suggests that the teacher can ask the student how he feels about his assignment. Andy quickly picks up this idea, and continues to enrich it by acting it out. His enrichment may have become different from SF5's original idea, but Andy's performance with a deep and solemn voice is able to attract the audience's attention. In this way, he again retrieves the floor and proceeds to explain his idea of how to break the bad news. His idea is also funny, as it withholds the actual message about the bad assignment result, but paralinguistically signifies the adverse nature of this message. Andy's approach to directing the role-play is different from John's in Extract 3. Andy invites everyone in the audience to produce plots of the story, which he then enriches, recontextualises, or acts out himself, whereas John picks a specific student to act with him. In both approaches, the lecturer has a large amount of control over the development of the role-play. John implements his control through prompting his partner, whereas Andy leads the students with humour arising from imagination, acting, and the sharp contrast of ideas.

## 5.4 Humour as breaks in lectures

Humour is regarded by some to be a tension release mechanism (Freud (1960 [1905])); also §2.2.1), feeling of nonseriousness, i.e. something should not be taken seriously (Chafe, 2007), and a means of subverting authority and breaking norms (Holmes, 2000; Maybin and Swann, 2007a). Teaching and learning in lectures require high concentration. The average length of a part of a lecture in the Small Corpus is 59 minutes, and maintaining concentration for such a long time is demanding to both the lecturers and students. Humour in the classroom may be used to help them relax. Some evidence can be found in Neuliep's (1991) and White's (2001) studies, in which the participants reported that humour could release students' stress and make the lesson casual (§2.3.4). Nevertheless, the relaxing function of humour was not salient in the BASE data, because it was difficult to judge the members' psychological states on only discourse data. But this function recurs in the lecturer data, especially in Andy's and John's interviews. For example, in the interview data below, Andy referred to some activities in his lectures as a 'fairground', which went outside of the lectures and gave the student a break:

I structure my lecture in a particular way, but I also know that if you want people to be fresh, if you want people are coming fresh to the next bit in the lecture, you need, unless you're going to give them a break to go out you can't keep doing that, you can't say okay let's have another five minute break, you know they lose concentration, what you can do is you can lighten it [...] if you saw me giving a half hour lecture, there might be one or two jokes along the way [...] you can go outside [a lecture] with a task almost like a game you know the fairground, you can go outside with an anecdote, you can go out [...] or you can go out just with a very interesting bit of information or story

Andy's comment above described how he consciously established an alternative reality (§4.3.2), i.e. a 'fairground', as short breaks in his lectures. I explained in §4.3.2 that

alternative realities are strongly associated with humour, and in BASE, humour related to alternative realities occurs much more often in the lectures with high number of LTs. This pattern is also evident in the Small Corpus data, as Andy and John, whose lectures have far more HEs than the others, produce the majority of the HEs invoking alternative realities - 38 out of the 43 instances appear in their lectures. These instances display similar qualities as those introduced in §4.3.2, which involve verbal descriptions of alternative realities, role-play, or acting out reported speech. Returning to Andy's comment above: for him, keying (§4.3.2) such a 'fairground' could take a variety of forms: jokes, game-like tasks, anecdotes, stories, or just some interesting information. The role-play in Extract 7 in §5.3.4 is one example of Andy's keying 'the fairground'. In this section, I will analyse two HEs, one from Andy and the other from John, supplemented with lecturer data, to show how humour can serve as breaks in class.

### **Extract 8 - mutator**

Lecturer: Andy  
Module: Applied linguistics  
Lecture title: Writing  
Student level: MA

In the lecture time preceding Extract 8, Andy asked the students to mark a short article written by an imagined student; they finished and shared their marking. In the extract, Andy is commenting on the activity through referring to research on ways of giving feedback to students' writing.

- 1 Andy: I mean, these are just things I got very quickly and if you combine them you
- 2 get a massively rich set of potential ways of giving feedback, so, what I ask you to

3 do was of course completely unfair, I gave you a text and said mark it and nobody  
4 was going to sit there and say no, so you had to do it, and of course what we've  
5 learned through research is that really you need to use your options, and this is from  
6 Furneaux et al.'s research, some feedback options, "the teacher could be an initiator  
7 a supporter an adviser a suggester a provider and a mutator", changer, I like the  
8 mutator, I don't know if I ever mutated a student in my life but you know I am  
9 prepared to try it so there you go so what's happened in terms of writing research is  
10 that, feedback has become embodied in the process and the teacher's role has been  
11 rethought in all sorts of ways students have been much involved in that by the way  
12 the website is okay now I checked it all out and today this week's lecture is already  
13 up on it

Andy1-HE44

In the first half part of this extract (L#1-6), Andy has been focusing on the teaching content. He starts reading out a quotation on a PowerPoint slide projected on the whiteboard. His reading is then interrupted when he gets to the word 'mutator'. The interruption is manifested firstly in the sudden rise of Andy's own voice (Bakhtin (1984[1929])); also see §2.4.4) - 'I like the mutator' - in the reading of Furneaux et al.'s quotation. Secondly, Andy's change of vocal feature when he says 'mutator' is highly noticeable - two of my personal informants (see §3.3.2), who are British, commented that Andy was putting on a Northern (British) accent here.

'Mutator' is a rare word and its use in this quotation seems incongruous<sup>38</sup>. Although Andy explains that 'mutator' is used here as a synonym of 'changer' (L#7), the fact that he picks up on it suggests that he has been struck by its unusualness. As such, he makes a remark 'I

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<sup>38</sup> In Oxford English Dictionary, the word 'mutator' has three entries: the first one is '[a] person who changes; something which effects a change'; the other two entries refer to genes and organism.

don't know if I ever mutated a student in my life but you know I am prepared to try it'.

Andy explained this remark in the interview:

I come across mutator and in the moment it just strikes me as an utterly duff word you know, a mutator so when I say it, it kind of comes out as mutator and in saying mutator, I suddenly see how ridiculous it is, so I go off [...] I don't think I've ever been a mutator I've never mutated a student in my life, which is making up a word of course, you don't mutate somebody

The idea of mutating a student in the sense Andy 'makes up' is unusual and absurd.

Technically, this is very difficult to achieve in reality. Andy violates the maxim of quality (§2.4.1), which can be instantly noticed as insincere. Nonetheless, mutating human beings can of course happen in imaginary worlds, e.g. in science fictions. This was pointed out by several of my personal informants who associated Andy's remark with scenes in Sci-Fis, TV shows or films. Moreover, it was suggested by Andy himself:

you know [...] usually it's used intransitively isn't it, [...] you don't mutate something, at least not to my knowledge I've never checked it up, maybe there is a transitive use, but even so, I associate it with mutant [...] it's associated with non-human things, or if it's human then human but in a sinister sense, so you know mutated into an alien, we usually would plan sort of things like that

For people who are aware of the Sci-Fi culture, and hence can make similar associations, Andy's utterance recontextualises (Bauman and Briggs, 1990) certain Sci-Fi language, and evokes an alternative reality which overlaps with the current teaching and learning context - a world in which absurd events can happen, and be enjoyed. In this fictional reality, Andy does not know if he has mutated any students, which is again incredible because one does not easily forget it if he/she has mutated a human being. Moreover, in this fictional reality, Andy is prepared to try mutating a student.

I classify Andy's remarks in L#8-9 as a 'quip' (§4.3.1). It departs from the previous

teaching flow structurally (it is brief and inserted in the middle of a more consistent flow, i.e. reading the quotation; it is signalled back to the reading by 'there you go'), paralinguistically (the change of accent), and interpersonally (the change of voice; Andy includes the students in the fictional world). These departures create incongruous effects, and reflexively highlight the quip. In addition, there is another aspect of incongruity in this extract, which is the absurdity of the message of mutating a student. Absurd as it is, it is a recontextualisation of plots that can be found in many Sci-Fi stories, which is a popular literary genre in British culture. For listeners who are not familiar with the culture, they can still appreciate the absurdity of the message itself, but the imagery of, e.g. Doctor Who<sup>39</sup> rescuing a human from being mutated by an alien creature, as suggested by one of my personal informants, would be absent. This imagery lends the absurd story some sense of familiarity, and saves it from sounding merely idiosyncratic. To sum up, a single type or any combination of the types of incongruity discussed above can trigger humour; the cultural allusion to the fictional world intensifies the effect, but is not essential to humour in Extract 8.

The humorous quip in Extract 8 interrupts the teaching of the research results and establishes a fictional reality. By doing so, Andy presents affective face (§4.3.3) that is ready to enjoy backstage thoughts with the audience. This was pointed out by Andy himself:

that is just me having a little dialogue with myself in front of the students, and sometimes one of the things I do is I kind of um, I don't get much opportunity, I think, to share my

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<sup>39</sup> 'Doctor Who is a British science fiction television programme produced by the BBC. The programme depicts the adventures of [...] a time-travelling, humanoid alien known as the Doctor who [...] faces a variety of foes while working to save civilisations, help people and right wrongs' (cited from Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doctor\\_Who](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doctor_Who)).



thinking, I sometimes do about the thing on the spot, but then anything I can get to is to share some of the clutter and some of the things that are going through my head as they occur

For students who have sensed the unusualness of the word 'mutator' and its association with science fictions, they can enjoy the brief break and relax together with Andy. Extract 8 is one of the many examples in which Andy constructs a 'fairground' in lectures. This alternative reality maintains, partly or wholly, the relational connections between the lecturer and students, but breaks away from the restrictions of time and space. By doing so, interesting things that are more likely to exist outside lectures can happen and 'are happening' in the lecture. However, the oddity of the word 'mutator' in Extract 8 and its cultural allusion are not easily accessible to international students.

In his interview, John's accounts of his humour also invoke the idea of constructing breaks in the lecture. An example of this is Extract 9 below, in which John tricks the students.

#### **Extract 9 - woo**

- 1 John: So pronunciation can be a can be a problem and ur pronunciation is one area
- 2 especially where, in my opinion, we can identify particular difficulties in particular
- 3 mother tongues, so you said th is difficult
- 4 SF1: because in Chinese
- 5 John: Yes
- 6 SF1: we don't have that sound
- 7 John: Alright yeah so, I think it's ur is it called constructive analysis can be quite useful
- 8 there, I know sometimes # wo is difficult to WOmAn or WOLf, I always enjoy
- 9 teaching that because you have to tell the students woo woo <laughter>
- 10 SS: <laughter>

- 11 John: Come on woo <laughter> woo: <laughing voice> put your lips together </> let's all  
 12 do it together woo [woo: woo: woo:  
 13 SS: [woo: woo: woo: <laughter>  
 14 John: Well it makes me laugh anyway <laughter>  
 15 SS: <laughter>

John1:HE16

John is conveying the idea that difficulties in pronouncing particular sounds can be identified in particular mother tongues. He then gives 'woo' as an example (L#9), and insists that the students say it with him (L#11). As he repeatedly pronounces 'woo' followed by the whole class, he starts laughing. The situation imitates a language lesson in which the students practise pronunciation. It is an alternative reality. This practice does not seem to be necessary in terms of the teaching point of the 'real' lecture. John is making the effort probably because, as he mentions in L#8-9 and 14, he enjoys teaching the sound and it makes him laugh. This was confirmed in his interview:

When you teach people to pronounce a woo you'll have to get them to pucker up their lips woo:: <laughter> which is a bit ridiculous and <laugh> well it's not ridiculous you know, it's <laugh> they look as if they are kind of putting on lip stick or if they're <stick out lips> you know like a big kiss, so # and to me, it's not very professional but, to me it's kind of ur it amuses me to see sort of a whole lot of students <laugh> [...] you know sometimes you have to amuse yourself <laughter> [...] I do that sometimes perhaps it's not very professional, if I enjoy it then the students enjoy it

As John openly admitted above, the major reason why he made the students pronounce 'woo' in class was to amuse himself, and it was not professional. This event breaks the norm of how a lecturer behaves in class, and digresses from the actual teaching. John hence takes a break in the lecture by amusing himself. Interestingly, Andy, in his own interview, made a similar point:

I can give you the pedagogic justification for most of the things that I do, but if I am honest, I am not sure of the extent to which that is post-hoc, because at rock bottom, I want to enjoy those two hours as well, I won't enjoy all of them, because there are boring bits to get through, but the more fun I can have, and the more I can think on my feet, and do things in a bit of a different way if the opportunity comes up and use students' things to make things different, the more fun I am gonna have, so it's selfish

Both John and Andy pointed out that they used humour in lectures, at least partly, to amuse themselves. In this respect, on top of the interpersonal and task-oriented aspects of humour in lectures, which have been continuously depicted in this and the previous chapters, humour in this context has an 'unprofessional' or even 'selfish' function, namely to amuse the lecturers themselves. This can be considered a ludic function of humour (cf. Cook, 2000). As Andy made clear above, such humour allows things to be done 'in a different way'. The humour breaks the norm of how a lecturer should behave in class. John and Andy, in other words, take a break in the lectures by amusing themselves. For John, he believed that if he enjoyed the humour, the student would enjoy it.

## **5.5 Summary and conclusion**

The analysis in this chapter demonstrates the diversified ways in which humour functions in the lectures. These functions fall into three general groups:

1. Humour as a teaching tool
  - Stories and anecdotes
  - Role-play
2. Humour as interpersonal strategies
  - Self-deprecating humour
  - Teasing the students

- Joking about someone absent
- Managing interpersonal activities in long interactions

### 3. Humour as breaks in lectures

The first two functions underlie all HEs in the Small Corpus (and in BASE as well), whereas the last one is common in only two lecturers' lectures. The uses of humour by the seven lecturers vary considerably in the Small Corpus. The variation can be seen to form a continuum. At one end, humour is a teaching tool, e.g. in Amy's lectures, in which interesting stories and anecdotes are planned and delivered to illustrate teaching points. At the other end, lecturers such as Andy and John, show some kind of humorous personality. For example, Andy frequently tells stories and anecdotes, does role-play, delivers incongruous ideas, and creates alternative realities to establish a 'fairground' for himself and the students; John plays with his students to entertain himself and the students. The use of humour in Andy's and John's lectures to a certain extent demonstrates a ludic quality. In between the two ends of the continuum, humour is used as strategies for carrying out interpersonal activities - the lecturers use it to do face acts in monologues and interactions with the students.

The analysis in Chapter 6 will explore the problems that are related to the different uses of humour by the lecturers. As the analysis of the individual HEs in Chapter 5 demonstrates, humour in them can be, to a certain extent, problematic to Chinese students. These problems will be further discussed and explored in Chapter 6, which examines the student data.

## 6. The students' perceptions of humour

This chapter presents the results and findings derived from 11 playback and discussion sessions carried out with 39 Chinese students in order to find out how they perceived their lecturers' humour in class. During these sessions, audio recordings of 17 HEs were played to the students. The students' responses to humour in these episodes were collected through written responses, group discussions and interviews (for detailed explanation of the elicitation techniques see §3.2.2). The 17 HEs were selected because they embraced one or more characteristics of humour observed to be common in BASE and the Small Corpus, and/or those that were hypothesised to be problematic to Chinese students (see the rationale of this research method in §3.3.4). The selection included:

- HEs that manifest the lecturer's lecturing style (§4.1.2; §5.1.1-2);
- HEs that are in the forms of stories, anecdotes or quips (§4.3.1; §5.1.1; Extracts 1, 2 and 8);
- Teasing and self-deprecating humour which may be difficult for Chinese students (§4.3.3; Extracts 4-7);
- Humour expressing social values which may be difficult for Chinese students (§4.3.3; Extracts 2, 6 and 8).

In addition to the 39 Chinese students, I talked to six students from the lectures who, in their upbringing, had used English frequently outside of the classroom<sup>40</sup>. I refer to these students as 'informants'. These informants listened to the same audio extracts as their

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<sup>40</sup> The six students are from Britain, Cameroon, Nigeria, India, Denmark, and Italy. Further discussions of these students' origin and reasons for recruiting them are included in §3.3.2.

Chinese classmates who participated in my research, and commented on the humour. I also consulted five British colleagues and friends for their interpretation of some HEs. They are referred to as ‘personal informants’. A detailed explanation of my selection of research participants can be found in §3.3.2.

In §6.1 below, I present the Chinese participants’ general perceptions of humour across the 17 audio extracts elicited in an initial question on the respondent’s report (RR) forms (see Appendix 3). In the remainder of §6.1, I discuss the students’ accounts of four HEs, taken from the group discussions, interviews, and written answers on the RR forms. These four extracts have been analysed in Chapter 5, supplemented with lecturers’ and informants/personal informants’ accounts of them. This combination of different accounts of humour constitutes a form of triangulation (§3.3.4) bringing together different perspectives on the analysis of these four extracts:

- the researcher’s observational accounts of humour in the lectures and analytical accounts of the discourse of the HEs, which is partly informed by the informants and personal informants (Chapter 5);
- the lecturers’ interview accounts of the HEs (included in Chapter 5 and this chapter);
- The Chinese students’ written accounts of the HEs on the RR forms and interactive accounts in the interviews and group discussions (Chapter 6).

This combination of accounts of humour was employed in the scrutiny of all the 17 HEs used in the playback and discussion sessions. It provided evidence of certain differences in the accounts of different parties involved in the research (the researcher, lecturers and students). A close review of these differences provided foci for further investigation revealing recurrent themes that are discussed in §6.2. Due to the limited space, only four

extracts have been chosen to illustrate this process, but these are representations of differences across the full set of the 17 HEs.

## 6.1 The students' accounts of humour

Eleven playback and discussion sessions were held in total, including students for each lecture recorded (see Table 3.3 in §3.3.2). In the case of Deep's lecture, no HEs had been identified (see §5.1). In the two sessions for students from this lecture, I played extracts that included Deep's laughter, but the participants did not recognise any of these as humour. I therefore excluded these two playback and discussion sessions from my analysis below.

Tables 6.1-9 below summarise the Chinese participants' answers on the RR forms (Appendix 3) in response to the question 'did you notice any instances of humour in what the lecturer said or did'. Groups B and C attended the same lectures (Andy2, Amy1, and John1); Groups G, H, I, J also attended the same lecture (Eric2). The transcripts of all the 17 HEs are included in Appendix 5.

Ext no.	Ext title	Lecture	Ping	Lin	Su
ext 10*	mark it anyway you want	Andy1	Y	Y	Y
ext 8	mutator	Andy1	Y	N	N
ext 13	look forward to assignment	Amy1	N	N	Y
ext 12*	learning to ride a bicycle	Amy1	Y	Y	Y

Table 6.1 Group A

\* HEs with laughter; ext= extract; Y/N= yes/no

Ext no.	Ext title	Lecture	Hong	Lian	Pan	Sun	Landy	Fang
ext 14*	“.hhh.”	Andy2	Y	Y	n/a <sup>41</sup>	Y	Y	Y
ext 7*	how to break bad news	Andy2	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
ext 13	look forward to assignment	Amy1	N	N	N	N	N	N
ext 1*	a strong form of integrative motivation	Amy1	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
ext 15*	nothing comes from nothing	John1	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N
ext 16	the spot commands a fine view	John1	N	N	Y	N	N	N

Table 6.2 Group B

\*HEs with laughter; ext= extract; Y/N= yes/no

Ext no.	Ext title	Lecture	Kent <sup>K</sup>	Yan	Shen	Jian	Wong	Chen
ext 14*	“.hhh.”	Andy2	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
ext 7*	how to break bad news	Andy2	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
ext 13	look forward to assignment	Amy1	N	Y	N	N	N	N
ext 1*	a strong form of integrative motivation	Amy1	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
ext 15*	nothing comes from nothing	John1	N	N	N	N	N	N
ext 16	the spot commands a fine view	John1	N	N	N	N	N	N

Table 6.3 Group C

\*HEs with laughter; <sup>K</sup> student from South Korea; ext= extract; Y/N= yes/no

<sup>41</sup> The participant, Pan, was late for the session and missed the first audio extract.



Ext no.	Ext title	Lecture	Can	Eli	Wen <sup>M</sup>	Ning	May <sup>M</sup>	Norman <sup>M</sup>
ext 2	an Englishman in a karaoke bar	Eric1	N	Y	Y	N	Y	N
ext 11	dogs' meeting	Eric1	Y	Y	N	N	Y	N
ext 5	Al Yamamah deal	Eric1	N	N	N	N	N	N

Table 6.4 Group F

\*HEs with laughter; <sup>M</sup> students from Macau; ext= extract; Y/N= yes/no

Ext no.	Ext title	Lecture	Alin	Bee	Cici	Ding
ext 4*	good news and better news	Eric2	Y	Y	Y	Y
ext 17	buy American, buy Toyota	Eric2	N	N	N	Y
ext 18	great delight in marking	Eric2	N	N	N	N

Table 6.5 Group G

\*HEs with laughter; ext= extract; Y/N= yes/no

Ext no.	Ext title	Lecture	Kai	Lu	Mo <sup>42</sup>
ext 17	buy American, buy Toyota	Eric2	N	N	n/a
ext 18	great delight in marking	Eric2	N	N	n/a

Table 6.6 Group H

ext= extract; Y/N= yes/no

Ext no.	Ext title	Lecture	Scott <sup>HK</sup>	Peng
ext 4*	good news and better news	Eric2	Y	N
ext 17	buy American, buy Toyota	Eric2	Y	N
ext 18	great delight in marking	Eric2	N	N

Table 6.7 Group I

\*HEs with laughter; <sup>HK</sup> student from Hong Kong; ext= extract; Y/N= yes/no

<sup>42</sup> Mo's RR forms are missing.

Ext no.	Ext title	Lecture	Fei	Fan	Gao	Han	Jun
ext 4*	good news and better news	Eric2	N	N	N	N	Y
ext 17	buy American, buy Toyota	Eric2	N	N	Y	N	N
ext 18	great delight in marking	Eric2	N	N	N	N	N

Table 6.8 Group J

\* HEs with laughter; ext= extract; Y/N= yes/no

Ext no.	Ext title	Lecture	Fon	Jin
ext 6	sales people in the UK	Lynn1	N	N
ext 19*	Tango ad	Lynn1	Y	N

Table 6.9 Group K

\* HEs with laughter; ext= extract; Y/N= yes/no

As can be seen from the tables above, HEs responded to with laughter in the lectures (marked with asterisks) were much more likely to be recognised as humour by the participants, indicating a possibility that they responded to laughter as a cue in identifying humour. One exceptional case was Group J's responses to Extract 4. None of the participants recognised humour in this extract despite the fact that there were several clear bouts of laughter in it. In fact, one of the participants, Gao, reported that he had noticed the laughter but did not understand what was humorous. The reactions of Group J may reflect to a certain extent their dissatisfaction with the department as explained in detail in §6.1.3 and §6.2.3. Most students did not identify humour in HEs without laughter, including four that have been examined in Chapter 5 (Extracts 2, 5, 6, and 8). However, I will show below that identifying an episode as humorous does not necessarily mean that this humour is understood or appreciated.

In sections 6.1.1-4 below, I discuss further the student accounts of four illustrative HEs.

Then in §6.2, recurrent themes drawn from the analysis of all the 17 HEs played in the

playback and discussion sessions will be summarised and discussed in order. When the Chinese students wrote on the RR forms, they often mixed English and Chinese. In the discussion below, if the RR form data was written in Chinese, I give the original Chinese with my own English translations. All the interviews and group discussions, apart from those with Groups B and C, were conducted in Chinese. Again, I give the original Chinese with English translations. The participants in Groups B and C insisted on using English throughout the playback and discussion session, so their data is shown in English only.

### **6.1.1. Extract 1 - a strong form of integrative motivation**

(See Extract 1 in §5.2.1, or Extract 1 in Appendix 5.)

I explained in §5.2.1 that the humour in this extract was prepared, rehearsed, and did not involve violation of maxims (§2.4.1). As such, I hypothesised that it would be easily comprehended by Chinese students. Twelve students, divided into two groups (Table 6.2; Table 6.3), participated in one playback and discussion session. Their answers on the Respondents' report (RR) forms<sup>43</sup> demonstrated clear understanding of the episode, and all of them noticed humour. The lecturer, Amy was praised for supporting her argument well (Hong), being interesting/funny (Sun and Wong) in contrast to 'boring theory' (Wong), and 'easy to understand' in contrast to 'abstract theory' (Wong). In the group interview, one of the participants, Pan, summed up her appreciation of Amy's use of an interesting and funny example.

Pan: I think the example from Amy about the relationship to be wanted (sic) for motivation to

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<sup>43</sup> These two groups of participants chose to use English throughout the playback and discussion session. See §3.3.2 'Audio playback and answering RR forms (students)'.

help learners to learn another language, I think that's kind of funny because, as we have discussed before, at our age we are very interested in some topics about relationship about love, so that arouse our interest to listen to (sic), she gave us more obvious, we are more familiar with that kind of example cases, so we can understand the concepts or the abstract ideas more easily, and um I think that's kind of funny, I really appreciated her examples

Interview (Group B)

The task-based function of humour in Extract 1, as my analysis shows in §5.2.1, is to teach the concept of integrative motivation, and to explain the argument regarding how the relevant research tradition contributes to practical teaching. The participants' accounts of Extract 1 suggest that this strategy was successful. This was evident in that many of them could recount the point of Amy's story, which was broadly consistent with Amy's accounts. For example, Hong made the comment below on her RR form.

Hong: As students, we can't expect to learn language by that extreme method. And as teachers, realising this, we need to find some solutions.

RR

Later in the interview, other students replied to my question below:

- 1<sup>44</sup> YW<sup>45</sup>: What's Amy's view towards research on integrative motivation?
- 2 Landy: later she explained the problem is, I've written it here
- 3 Sun: I think she means that she didn't agree
- 4 YW: she didn't agree
- 5 Shen: I think she mentioned that it is very important, but there's no way definitely
- 6 Landy: <takes out RR form> Hey, I get it

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<sup>44</sup> The numbers represent speaking turns, which are referred to as 'T' hereafter.

<sup>45</sup> Here and in other transcripts 'YW' stands for the researcher.

7 YW: yeah

8 Landy: “the problem is this research might not be for teachers’ sake, because it’s not very practical, for teachers, it works well on learners but not very good for teachers”

Interview (Groups B and C)

The interview data above shows that the participants grasped Amy’s argument concerning the research tradition of integrative motivation. In this sense, humour in Extract 1 fulfils its planned teaching task and functions successfully. A theme that appeared in this and a few other extracts was that the participants often identify humour in the teacher’s allusion to something familiar and usual in their daily life. For example, Pan described Amy’s story as ‘common’ on the RR form and ‘familiar’ in her interview data shown above. More discussion of this theme will be presented in §6.2.4.

### **6.1.2. Extract 2 - an Englishman in a karaoke bar**

(See Extract 2 in §5.2.1, or Extract 2 in Appendix 5.)

In Extract 2, Eric tells a story about a family member’s experience of doing business in China, which involves going to a karaoke bar, a very popular type of entertainment in China. As mentioned in discussion of this example in §5.2.1, there are cultural differences in the evaluation of karaoke, and this may create problems of understanding for Chinese students. In fact, Eric himself pointed out in the interview that ‘[understanding the story] would require an understanding of English culture’. Eric explained his motivation for choosing this specific story:

I told that story deliberately, because I want to make the distinction between the different types of cultural approaches, I could have easily talked about how urm American and Japanese businessmen [...] there’s lots of other examples you could use, but that particular example, one it’s true, two, I’ve got a lot of Chinese students, they see it from the Chinese

manager's point of view, the European see it from the other point of view [...] it (opens them both sides up) to the idea that there is a # the culture difference can be humorous [...] I could tell stories straight and I could give straight examples, but the idea of this Englishman being dragged around to a Chinese karaoke bar and getting terribly drunk, and probably getting laughed at quite a lot is one that is easier to remember

Eric believed that both the Chinese and European audience could relate to the story.

Moreover, the story was 'one that is easier to remember' because of 'the idea of this Englishman being dragged around to a Chinese karaoke bar and getting terribly drunk, and probably getting laughed at quite a lot'. Eric thought that this idea was 'amusing in itself' (his own words). One British student in this lecture, Derek, was my informant. Due to the time limit, I played to him only the second part of the story, i.e. what Eric called 'the better part of the story' (see L#21 of Extract 2). In his RR he described what he saw as humour in this extract.

A funny story of a misunderstanding between two people in which one was made to sing karaoke.

Informant's RR

He explained this further in a following interview:

Derek: the actual story when you think about it, it happens to a lot of people, I think it's quite funny, because it's misunderstanding, which is an innocent thing that happens [...]

YW: do you feel the misunderstanding between okay and karaoke particularly funny?

Derek: no, it could have been any words, it wasn't the fact but it was funny because you know, the story, you know you imagine he wasn't expecting he would be going to sing, you imagine it all in your head even though he didn't tell you exactly what happened, you can imagine what happened, it would have been quite funny

YW: so what would you imagine what's happening

- Derek: well you can imagine they probably got drunk, and then they probably made fools of themselves, and he was probably singing, but you wouldn't have expected him to have done it in the first instance, so when you (??) before he said okay, so he's agreed to something that he didn't really know but thought why not
- YW: so you said it could have been any other words apart from okay, so if it was another word which sounds like okay so you would still feel it quite funny
- Derek: It would have- it's still funny because it's funny when someone misunderstands what someone else said, you know what I mean, so it's funny to both people because they think one thing you think something else, and then when you realise oh actually we got it wrong, that's funny, but this was funny because it was so close because it was singing which was quite funny, people embarrassing themselves

#### Informant's Interview

Derek notes here that the misunderstanding between the two parties was funny, but what was more funny was that the story allowed people to imagine the scene in the karaoke bar. This latter point was almost identical to Eric's account above. The slight difference was that Derek referred to the imagery invoked by Eric's story, but this idea was not mentioned by Eric himself.

Six Chinese students took part in the playback and discussion session (Table 6.4). Three of them were from Macau and the others were from Mainland China. Again, I played only the second part of the story to the participants due to the time limit. Half of the participants did not notice humour in the extract. Can and Ning admitted that their English proficiency was low and they could not understand much of what was said. The three participants who noticed humour provided the following comments:

- Eli: [the humour is] shaking hands not ok yet, ok means karaoke

May: the misunderstanding was funny that the 'karaoke', he can spend the night at the Chinese karaoke and have fun

RR

- |        |   |   |
|--------|---|---|
| 1 Eli  | [...]然后老外，哎，这个生意谈成了？他说其实不是嘛 tonight okay, karaoke tonight, 然后唱完歌以后很开心嘛，结果还是没成你知道吗，做生意呢要了解，中国人就喜欢这种 karaoke 出去唱 k 嘛，对不对啊，这个老外就以为他 okay 了，其实他还没 okay<br>[...] | [...] then the foreigner thinks, oh, it's a deal? What he said was not tonight okay, karaoke tonight, then they go to sing and are very happy, eventually it's not a deal you know, you've got to know this if you're doing business, Chinese people like singing karaoke, right? the foreigner thinks he's okay, actually he's not okay<br>[...] |
| 2 May: | 第一个是很幽默啊，就是 misunderstanding 啊，对不对 [...] 我就觉得，第一个也蛮好笑的  | The first one is very humorous, it's misunderstanding, right? [...] I think the first one is quite funny  |
| 3 YW:  | 为什么？  | why?  |
| 4 May  | 因为他，就 misunderstand 那个，然后去了 karaoke，也蛮好笑的，他也笑啊，他在讲的时候，他也很好笑   | because he misunderstands it, then they go to karaoke, it's quite funny, he's laughing as well when he's saying it  |

Group discussion and interview (Group F)

May was asked several times in the playback and discussion session, by the other members and the researcher, to explain the humour in Extract 2, and she always pointed to the misunderstanding between the two parties in the story. Eli was trying to explain the humour through re-telling the story above. His understanding of the story was somewhat



limited. He considered the point of the story to be that foreign people needed to understand the Chinese way of doing business. The allusion to a man singing in a karaoke bar embarrassing himself was not mentioned by the Chinese participants. This may reflect what I suggested in §5.2.1 to be different sociocultural stances to karaoke in Britain and China: In Britain, karaoke singing is usually associated with embarrassment and getting drunk in a pub, while in urban China, karaoke is a very popular and ordinary entertainment. This reflects the fundamental difference between Eric's cousin and his Chinese partners, which, as Eric suggested in his interview data above, was the reason why he chose the story to illustrate 'different types of cultural approaches'. Therefore it was significant information. I argued in §4.3.3 understanding of stance in humour may contribute to in-group positive face (§2.4.2). However, a recurrent theme in the students' data was that stance is considered to be a peripheral element of the message conveyed. Further discussion of this theme is included in §6.2.3.

### **6.1.3. Extract 4 - good news and better news**

(See Extract 4 in §5.3.1, or Extract 4 in Appendix 5)

As shown in §5.3.1, Extract 4 contains an instance of self-deprecating humour. Eleven Chinese students, divided into three groups (Table 6.5, Table 6.7, and Table 6.8), commented on this Extract. One student (Scott) is from Hong Kong, and all the others are from Mainland China. All but one completed a RR form. Most participants in Groups G and I (Table 6.5 and Table 6.7) noticed humour in this extract, while most participants in Group J (Table 6.8) did not. Among the participants who perceived humour, most of their accounts indicated that they seemed to understand the point made implicitly by Eric - the students would like the fact that this was his last lecture. They could also recall the

exchanges between Eric and the British student, SF, in the class. Bee and Scott pointed out that Eric was joking. They did not, however, refer to self-deprecation, or any similar term. Later in the interviews, I questioned the participants about this, asking: what was the good news Eric spoke of; why did he say it was good news? Their answers are reproduced below:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 1 Bee: 我觉得就是他说反话, 就是本来这个就是最后一节课对于学生来讲不应该是一个 good news, 但是他把它说成是 good news, 所以我就觉得挺 | I think he is saying the opposite, actually for students, it is not good news to have the last lecture, but he puts it as good news, so I feel |
| 2 YW: 你觉得他是在说反话  | you think he's saying the opposite   |
| 3 Bee: 嗯   | yes  |
| 4 YW: 你觉得为什么他要说是 good news 呢   | why did he say it's good news?   |
| 5 Bee: 因为这样-<laugh>  | cuz- <laugh>   |
| 6 Alin: 因为学生不喜欢上课啊, 然后听到是最后一节课, 我觉得不是 good news                                    | Cuz students don't like having lectures, then we heard it's the last lecture, I don't think it's good news                                     |
| 7 Bee: 对啊, 就是在学生的角度来讲, 上多一点课应该不是什么不好的事情  | yeah, from students' perspective, having more lectures is not a bad thing  |

Interview (Group G)

Interestingly, Alin and Bee believed that what Eric meant by 'good news' was that the students would have no more lectures. This was different from Eric's own account of the extract - 'good news is they've got rid of me'. It also diverged from my informants'

answers to the same questions<sup>46</sup>:

Tom: good news we won't have to see him again right? it was a joke, a self-deprecating joke at the fact that we wouldn't want to see him again, so we would be pleased with that news

Arni: but he's right, you know

<laughter>

#### Informants' discussion

The humorous self-deprecation in the extract, referred to by Eric himself and by the informants, was lost in Alin's and Bee's interpretations of 'the good news'. Their interpretation, that Eric was suggesting the students did not like lectures, shift the butt of the humour from Eric to the students. However, Bee and Alin did not take this literally, believing that Eric meant the opposite.

The members in Group J are different from those in Groups G and I in that they had serious difficulty in understanding the audio extract. This was evident first in their very brief answers on the RR forms, and secondly their frequent comments in the discussion that they had not understood what was said.

Gao appeared to understand very little of the extract. In response to the question on the RR form 'please summarise what the lecturer said in the audio extract', he simply wrote 'nothing', suggesting that he had understood nothing. Nevertheless, he still detected humour in the extract because of the accompanying laughter - 'there must be humour [...] cuz many people are laughing'. Later, he attributed his incomprehension to unfamiliarity with 'British humour':

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<sup>46</sup> I referred to three informants regarding the humour in Extract 4. Two of them, Tom and Lenny, were British, and the other one, Arni, was Danish.

- 8 Gao: British humour 我真的一点都不了解, 他说的什么了第一个? I really know nothing about British humour, what did he say in the first one?
- Gao's remark is one example of the participants' reference to fixed national cultures when explaining their lack of understanding of humour. Further discussion of this theme will be included in §6.2.2. Later, I asked Group J if they could say what the good news was that Eric spoke of; and why he said this was good news. Below is part of their discussion.
- 9 Fei: good news 就是说最后一节正式的课啊 good news means this is the last lecture
- 10 Fan: 嗯, 就是告诉你说这是最后一节了 yeah, he's telling us this is the last lesson
- 11 Han: 这个叫 good news 啊? <laugh> you call that good news? <laugh>
- 12 Fan: 然后再给你一个打击, 说这个不是 then he puts you off by saying this is not the  
最后一节课, 还有人帮我们上 last lecture, someone else's going to teach us  
[...] [...]
- 13 YW: 为什么说这个是 good news? why is it good news?
- 14 Fei: 因为对于我们学生来说, 这是最后一节他上的课, 他可能会觉得我们觉得是 good news 吧。 because to us students, this is his last lecture, maybe he thinks we would see it as good news
- 15 Gao: 他可能觉得学生不喜欢上课吧, 然后如果这是最后一节课的话[...] 比如说, 对学生是最后一节课, 他不愿意上课的话, 那就是说以后你不用上课, 那可能会就给你一个希望, 然后再给你打击一下那种感觉 maybe he thinks students don't like having lessons, if this is the last lecture [...] for example, it's the last lecture, if one does not want to have lectures, then you have no more, that gives you a hope, then he gives you a set-back, something like that

Interview (group J)

Fei and Fan suggested above that ‘the good news’ referred to the fact that this was the last lecture. This led Gao to conjecture that the lecturer believed that the students did not like having lectures. This was consistent with Alin’s and Bee’s interpretations in Group G, which shifted the target of Eric’s evaluation to the students. In the interview, I tried to explore further their views of this apparent evaluation.

- 16 YW: 那他说的这个好消息, 你自己觉得是一个好消息吗? he said it’s good news, do you think so?
- 17 Fan: 当然不是 of course not
- 18 Gao: 当然不是了 of course not
- 19 YW: 为什么? why?
- 20 Gao: 而且说真的我觉得没课更惨 and honestly, it’s worse to have no more lectures
- 21 <laughter> <laughter>
- 22 YW: 解释一下, 这是什么意思? why?
- 23 Fei: 它不是好事, 就- it’s not good, it’s-
- 24 Gao: 你没课上了 no lectures means
- 25 Jun: 没课上了就是差不多要考试啦 no lectures means exams are coming
- [...] [...]
- 26 YW: 那你觉得老师他自己觉得这是一个好事吗? do you think the lecturer himself thinks it’s good news?
- 27 Gao: 对他来说, 我觉得因为英国人都比较懒, 而且如果他们不用工作的话 with regards to the lecturer, I think because British people are generally lazier, and if he doesn’t need to work
- 28 Fan: 没钱赚了 no money

- 29 Fei: 挺好的 pretty good
- 30 Gao: 他们才不会根据你工作时间来算 they don't get paid according to working time,  
钱, 要不然他全二十四小时开工 otherwise they all work twenty four hours [...]  
了[...]
- 31 Jun: 他又不是靠这些赚你们这些中国人 he doesn't depend on these to make money  
人(inaudible) from you Chinese people (inaudible)

Interview (Group J)

The students unanimously rejected the idea that having no more lectures was good news to them. When I then asked them if the lecturer thought it was good news (T26), Gao's response surprised me as he made a somewhat derogatory claim about British people, implying that the lecturer would be happy not to teach any lectures because then he would not need to work. Gao's comments up to this point in the playback and discussion session suggest that he thought that Eric liked the idea of having no more lectures to teach, and assumed that the students liked it too, whereas Gao himself preferred having more lectures. Gao therefore constructed a situation in which he and the lecturer held opposing opinions. Other participants, including Fan, Fei and Jun, appeared to buy into Gao's opinion (T28-31). This differs considerably from Eric's account of what happened in Extract 4 as 'playing a game' (§5.3.1). Later, I asked the students in Group J to comment on Eric's humour in general:

- 32 Gao: 其实有时候我们根本不知道他是不是 actually sometimes we just don't know if  
在幽默 he's being humorous or not
- 33 Fan: 对啊 yeah
- 34 Fei: 听不懂 don't understand it

- 35 Fan: 大家一笑我们都笑<laughter> everyone's laughing, and we laugh  
<laughter>
- 36 YW: 有时候你听不懂是吧 sometimes you don't understand it right?
- 37 Fan: 因为他自己在那儿笑, 我们就看他笑 cuz he's laughing there himself, we just  
watch him laugh
- 38 Gao: 而且如果有时候你身边有一堆外国 and if you're with a crowd of foreigners, and  
人, 然后大家都笑了你不笑, 你只能 everyone's laughing, you can only follow  
跟着笑 and laugh
- 39 <laughter> <laughter>

#### Interview (Group J)

The students' discussion at T32-39 depicted the experience of being excluded from humour in lectures, although they felt the need to laugh together (T35 and 38). Gao related this to behaviour when surrounded by 'foreigners'<sup>47</sup>. This and several other instances in Group J's discussion indicated a sense of alienation - not understanding British humour (T8); British people being generally lazier, and the lecturer not wishing to teach whereas Chinese wanting more lectures (T16-31); seeing the need to laugh along with foreigners (T32-39). These issues will be further discussed in §6.2.2 and §6.2.3.

#### 6.1.4. Extract 8 - mutator

(See Extract 8 in §5.4, or Extract 8 in Appendix 5.)

In my analysis of the discourse in Extract 8 (§5.4), I suggested that the culture-laden aspect of the humorous quip - 'I don't know if I ever mutated a student in my life but you know I

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<sup>47</sup> 'Foreigner' in Chinese (*wai guo ren* 外国人) is a common and neutral term used in daily life to refer to, generally, any people who are not Chinese.

am prepared to try it' - might not be comprehended by international students. However, its incongruity at a formal level, i.e. it departs from the previous teaching flow structurally and paralinguistically, should be comparatively easy for everyone including international students. With this hypothesis, I used this extract in the playback and discussion session with three Chinese (Mainland) students (Table 6.1).

Only one participant in this session, Ping, identified humour. However, Ping misunderstood what Andy said. The two other students, Lin and Su, missed the humour probably because they did not hear or understand the word 'mutator', or because the quip itself was too brief and so not perceived. These two possibilities can be classified as language problems in the traditional sense (see §3.4.4). Problems of language were pointed out by Lin in the group discussion, and by Su in our conversation after the playback and discussion session. However, as my analysis in §5.4 suggests, there are several cues to indicate that this is a humorous episode, so even if an international student cannot understand why it is humorous, he/she may well be able to perceive some of these cues. But in the group discussion, both Lin and Su commented that there was nothing noticeable in Extract 8:

- |                          |   |
|--------------------------|---|
| 1 Lin: 第三段呢              | How about [Extract 8]?                        |
| 2 Su: 没有感觉               | nothing                                       |
| 3 Lin: 我也是               | I feel the same                               |
| [...]                    | [...]   |
| 4 Lin: 我觉得他这个可能是因为语速说话的这 | I think it's probably to do with his speech   |
| 个口音问题吧, 我觉得太快就没太 catch   | speed and accent, I feel he talks too fast    |
| 到他内容所以感觉就没什么可笑的地方        | and I can't catch the content so I don't feel |
|                          | anything funny                                |



5 Su: 我觉得好像这个老师倒是没怎么样, 我觉得好像就是谈了两点, 就是说就是一个很一般的 information 的这种口令, 就传达了一种信息, 就没有感觉的

I think the teacher is okay, I think he talks about two points, very ordinary information, an order, simply conveying some information, so I don't feel anything

6 Lin: 他好像就是在讲那个 feedback 是吧

he was talking about feedback, right?

Group discussion (group A)

In the interview, Ping tried to explain her understanding of the humour, but could not tell what exactly it was that Andy had not done in his life. Her comprehension of what was said was therefore limited, but it is likely that she noticed some cues, and thus perceived the utterance as humorous. She was able to construct an account of what the humour might be:

Ping: 我是觉得他就是说, 我一生都没有做过, 然后我现在要不要做一下, 我觉得还是挺 funny 的, 我就觉得, 如果老师或别人说我一生都没有做过什么事情, 我就觉得这是一个夸张, 觉得挺搞笑的

I think he's saying I have never done that in my life, and then shall I do it now, I think it's quite funny, I think, if teachers or other people say I have never done something in my life, I think that is exaggeration, it is quite funny

Interview (Group A)

Ping's account suggested that Andy made an insincere (exaggerated) judgement of himself, and hence she mistook the target of Andy's evaluation in the quip.

The student responses to Extract 8 give rise to two issues. Firstly, participants (here, Lin and Su) may consider their low language proficiency to be the reason of their miscomprehension of humour. I will question this view in §6.2.2. Secondly, insufficient understanding of humour does not always stop a participant (here, Ping) from appreciating

it. Further discussion of this point will be included in §6.2.1.

## **6.2 Discussion**

In the section below, I draw out some themes from the students' accounts of the 17 HEs discussed in §6.1.

### **6.2.1. Identifying, understanding, and appreciating humour**

Hay (2001) argues that identifying (or 'recognising' in her word), understanding, and appreciating humour are in an 'entailment relationship' (ibid.:55): one must identify humour in order to understand it; one must recognise and understand humour in order to appreciate it. Bell (2007b), however, challenges this argument, showing in an analysis of her own data of conversations between native and non-native English speakers that partial understanding of humour does not preclude its appreciation. While some examples in my data show a relationship between understanding and appreciating of humour (for instance, in Extract 1 'a strong form of integrative motivation', humour was understood and also appreciated by most of the Chinese participants), the student data in my study provides broad support for Bell's (ibid.) finding. Students' accounts of humour show that the relationship between understanding and appreciating is far more complex than an entailment relationship.

Firstly, humour bears multiple interpretations. Taking Extract 2 'an Englishman in a karaoke bar' as an example, May and Eli understood and were amused by the slip regarding 'okay' and 'karaoke'. But they missed the implied stance and its allusion to the general British attitude to karaoke singing, which were seen to be essential to the humour by Eric himself and the British informant (§6.1.2). So understanding humour is not an 'all-

or-nothing affair' (Bell, 2007b:376). Secondly, there is evidence that insufficient understanding of humour does not always stop a participant from appreciating it. This can be illustrated with Ping's account of Extract 8 'mutator' - she did not understand the word 'mutator', but was able to notice cues of humour in Andy's delivery. Prompted by my questions, she could even construct an account of what the humour was, which was considered to be funny by her (§6.1.4). As such, Ping could appreciate humour in Extract 8 despite her unfamiliarity with a key word.

A similar reaction occurred in relation to another HE - Extract 10 'mark it anyway you want' (see Appendix 5) - in the same lecture taught by Andy. Humour permeates in this one-minute long extract. At least five instances of humour can be recognised: the clarification of who the essay comes from (L#3), which triggers laughter at the beginning; Andy's indifference to how the essay should be marked (L#13); his vocal emphasis on 'ANY WAY YOU WANT' (L#9-10); Andy's 'standard joke in mainstream teaching' (his own words) about irresponsible marking (L#17-18); and finally his whistle (L#20). One of the Chinese participants, Lin, explained that the clarification of 'you, not me' sounded humorous, but she also mentioned that she did not actually 'catch the meaning' when Andy said 'you not me'. This suggests that, despite her insufficient comprehension, Lin still recognised something that 'sounds humorous' and 'feels funny' (Lin's words) - probably through the laughter, or Andy's vocal features - and deduced the playfulness and incongruity of the utterance 'you not me'.

In this sense, Lin's response to Extract 10 and Ping's response to Extract 8 show that identification and appreciation of humour do not necessarily require understanding of what was said. Conversely, Hay (2001) also points out that comprehension of humour does not necessarily lead to appreciation of it. This is also demonstrated in my data. For example,

Yan, one of the participants in Group B, considered Amy's story in Extract 1 about the Canadian multilingual speaker to be an attempt at humour but not funny: 'I've heard so many such anecdotes. It's not new or interesting anymore'. If how funny one feels an instance of humour to be reflects how much one appreciates it, Yan obviously did not appreciate humour in Extract 1. This complex relationship between identifying, understanding and appreciating humour begs the questions of if and how we can assess competence in comprehending humour. If a student identifies humour in a lecturer's tease of the students, laughs in response, and maintains good rapport with the lecturer, but actually understands little of what the lecturer has said, would this suggest the student was more or less competent than another student who understands the tease but takes it seriously? Questions of this kind suggest the need for further investigation into 'humour competence'.

It should be pointed out that identification without full understanding of humour can also lead to a dissatisfactory outcome for students. As shown in the students' accounts of Extract 4 'good news and better news', Gao and Fan noticed humour through others' laughter and felt the need to laugh with the 'foreigners'. They were, however, frustrated by their lack of understanding of the humour (§6.1.3). This comprehension failure to understand humour is likely to have negative relational effects. This may be contrasted with responses to humour in Andy's Extracts 8 'mutator' and 10 'mark it anyway you want'. Humour was the default property of Andy's lecturing style (see §5.1.2), and this style was well known to his students - the three participants in Group A mentioned that humour was Andy's character. With such knowledge, the students were ready to recognise his attempts at humour, and his humour could still function within the lecture even if it was not understood.

### **6.2.2. Language and culture in comprehension of humour in lectures**

I have argued in Chapter 3 that language and culture are inextricable, and it would be therefore inappropriate to distinguish causes of misunderstanding humour based on conventional dichotomy between 'language' and 'culture'. As seen in §6.1, the Chinese participants had many problems of comprehending the HEs. Some of their comprehension of what was said in the audio extracts was far from complete. This was evident in their brief responses on the RR forms, e.g. Guo in Extract 4 'good news and bad news', and also their frequent confessions in the discussion to not understanding what was said, e.g. Can and Ning in Extract 2 'an Englishman in a karaoke bar', Group J in Extract 4 'good news and bad news', and Su in Extract 8 'mutator'. On other occasions, the participants could account for the humour, but their accounts differed considerably from those of the lecturers or informants, e.g. Alin and Bee in Extract 4 'good news and bad news', and Ping in Extract 8 'mutator'.

I showed in §6.1.4 that some participants attributed their misunderstanding of humour in the lectures to language problems in a narrow sense as explained in §3.4.4. In Group A, Su believed that her lack of vocabulary, especially relevant terminology, was a major barrier of her comprehension of lectures. Lin, commenting on Extract 10 'mark it anyway you want', suggested that Andy's rapid speech and his accent had affected her comprehension. In addition, Can and Ning in Group F and Jin in Group K frequently mentioned in the interviews that their English was not good enough. In some cases, there were signs of participants' unfamiliarity with certain vocabulary, which in the conventional sense is considered to be a language problem, e.g. 'mutator' in Extract 8. This word is not included

in the College English Syllabus (2000)<sup>48</sup>. But the cultural allusion that it bears, i.e. the Sci-fi culture in British media, is also problematic to international students. Another example is Extract 6 ‘sales people in the U.K.’, in which Lynn jokes about sales people in several industries in the U.K., including ‘pension’ and ‘double glazing’. Again, these two words/phrases are not in the College English Syllabus (2000). The Chinese students may well have difficulty understanding them. But understanding these words used by Lynn also requires cultural knowledge. First of all, the fact that double-glazed windows are uncommon in some parts of China means that relevant sociocultural knowledge is not easily accessible to students from these places.

Some participants did mention cultural differences as a factor in their lack of understanding of humour. In such instances, the participants often referred to ‘British humour’ and its perplexity, e.g. Gao in Group J (T8; §6.1.3). As the members in this group proceeded to discuss British humour, they made the following comments:

- |                              |   |
|------------------------------|---|
| 1 Fan: 这种有可能是英式的幽默，没办法理解     | this may be British humour, can’t understand it                 |
| 2 All: <laughter><br>[...]   | <laughter><br>[...]   |
| 3 Han: 不是，是英国太无聊了，我觉得没有什么好笑的 | no, it’s because Britain is boring, I don’t feel anything funny |
| 4 Fei: 都没娱乐                  | no entertainment  |

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<sup>48</sup> The vocabulary held in the College English Syllabus (2000) include approximately 6500 words, which are supposed to have been mastered by students by the time they take the College English Test ‘band 6’, the highest level of English test for non-English major undergraduates in Mainland China.

- 5 Han: 是啊没娱乐, 只能 (拿这些来乐)      yeah no entertainment, can only (make fun of these)

Group discussion (Group J)

The three participants co-constructed an explanation of why British humour is difficult for them to understand, commenting that British life was so boring that British people had to make fun of uninteresting things. In this way, they are themselves joking about British people. This illustrates Crithley's (2002:68-69) observation that 'ethnic humour', i.e. humour about a race other than one's own, is often characteristic of the idea that 'foreigners' do not have a sense of humour. Another instance is Fon and Jin in Group K, who both agreed that 'Chinese humour' and 'British humour' were different.

However, if we look at the Chinese participants' discourse in the group discussions, we can find many instances of humour which resonate with their British lecturer's humour. The remark above concerning boring British life functions in a similar way to the lecturers' interpersonal humour as shown in §5.3.2-3. Another example is Group F's interview data (Table 6.4) regarding Extract 5 'the Al Yamamah deal' (§5.3.2). None of the participants noticed humour in Extract 5. In the interview, I tried to pinpoint the location of the humour:

- |   |      |                   |  |
|---|------|-------------------|--|
| 1 | YW:  | 然后他说下面的时间希望你们来讲,  | then he said he wanted you to talk, at |
|   |      | 最后那一段除了上面这两个内容, 你 | the end of the extract, what else did  |
|   |      | 们觉得还有没有听到什么       | you hear?                              |
| 2 | May: | 他不舒服              | He's unwell                            |
| 3 |      | <laughter>        | <laughter>                             |
| 4 | May: | 他不想讲太多对不对         | He doesn't want to talk too much,      |
|   |      |                   | right?                                 |
| 5 | YW:  | 你就觉得没有什么幽默对吧      | so you didn't feel anything humorous?  |

- |    |         |                                     |  |
|----|---------|-------------------------------------|--|
| 6  | Norman: | 因为不知道那个东西是什么                        | because we don't know what that thing is   |
| 7  | YW:     | 哪个东西?                               | which thing?   |
| 8  | Norman: | 那个什么 yama                           | that yama  |
| 9  | YW:     | alyamamah                           | alyamamah  |
| 10 | Norman: | 不知道是什么东西, 所以不知道                     | we don't know what that is, so we don't know   |
| 11 | YW:     | 跟那个东西没有关                            | it has nothing to do with that   |
| 12 | May:    | 没有啊, 我没可能因为他不舒服我觉得搞笑的对不对, 他不舒服我不开心嘛 | No, it's impossible that we felt it funny because he was unwell, right? He's not well so I was not happy |
| 13 |         | <laughter>                          | <laughter>   |

Interview (group F)

May expressed 'deep' concern over Eric's sickness at T12. The earnest affect (§2.4.4) signalled playfulness. Moreover, the Chinese equivalent to a tag question, '对不对' as translated into 'right?', reminds one of Eric's tag question in Extract 5 (L#6), which was pointed out to be a cue of irony (see §5.3.2). Such a way of playing with stance resonates in many ways with what Eric himself did in Extract 5. In fact, the group members' laughter in response suggested that they sensed the playfulness.

The instances above show similarities between the lecturers' and the Chinese participants' humour, challenging the latter group's accounts of the inherent difference between humour in the two cultures they represent. Differences between people from different backgrounds in terms of sociocultural contexts, norms, and systems cannot be reduced to a notion of inherent differences between two supposedly monolithic national cultures. However, the



Chinese students' ascription in my research context to two incompatible national categories of humour, i.e. British and Chinese humour, needs not mean that they held such an essentialist view of two monolithic cultures. Conversationalists often ascribe or manipulate fixed linguistic or cultural identities for the purpose of convenience, to build common ground in a group or for other reasons. This phenomenon has been studied by Otsuji and Pennycook (2010), who suggest that it is a feature of urban interaction with communicators from mixed backgrounds. In the case of my Chinese participants, incomprehension of 'British humour' enhanced the bond between the research group members as Chinese. The Chinese students' reference to the two fixed cultures in my research context may therefore not be as problematic as it seems. However, my own findings here may be considered along with evidence from other research studies, as discussed below.

Various studies have reported a particular pattern of socialisation of Chinese students in the U.K.: Chinese students experience much less intercultural interaction with British people than they expect, and easily get into the habit of stereotyping British people (Edwards and An, 2006; Gu, 2009; Robson and Turner, 2007; Spencer-Oatey and Xiong, 2006) and auto-stereotyping (Tian and Lowe, 2009). In Tian and Lowe's study, the vast majority of their Chinese respondents failed to interact meaningfully with British people, and socialised mainly with Chinese friends throughout their stay in Britain. In my study, the Chinese students' discrimination between two national categories of humour, may also be seen as stereotyping British people and auto-stereotyping. This way of stereotyping has a clear pitfall: by perceiving that 'British humour' and 'Chinese humour' are inherently different, understanding the former becomes impossible to the Chinese students, so they can give up making effort to understand it. This may be associated with a more widespread lack of

communication with British people. Based on my observations in the field, Chinese students in the lectures recorded tended to stick together wherever they went. In this respect, my participants' stereotypical accounts in the research context reflect the widely reported socialising pattern of Chinese students in the U.K. The students' tendency to stereotype and auto-stereotype is an issue requiring further academic attention, a point I return to in the final chapter.

### **6.2.3. Perceptions of stance and face acts in humour**

I suggested in Chapter 4 that humour highlights the expression of stance in discourse (§4.3.3), and this is evident in all the extracts discussed in Chapter 5. As can be seen in the examples in BASE and the Small Corpus, the marking of stance by humour is seldom explicit, and I suggested that this might lead to difficulties in Chinese students' understanding the lecturers' stance expressed in the HEs. The student data in §6.1 shows that many of the Chinese participants experienced problems in the perception of stance. When humour in an HE was perceived, Chinese participants accounted for stance in very different ways than the lecturers or informants, e.g. the evaluation in the karaoke story in Extract 2. On most occasions, however, many of the Chinese participants were simply unaware of the expression of any stance. Extract 5 'the Al Yamamah deal' is one example. I explain this further below.

In Extract 5, Eric teases his students. As my analysis in §5.3.2 shows, he ironically implies certain messages: firstly, he is telling the students not to make unreasonable excuses for their unfulfilled task, and secondly, he is reminding, or even warning them to do their homework next time. The British informant, Derek, noticed humour in this extract.

Derek: I thought it was quite funny because I think it was the end of it, where he was talking about he's losing his voice and basically he didn't want to talk anymore, we were all meant to have done a bit of homework and talk about Al Yamamah (??), I thought it was quite funny because he used the fact that a lot of the people in our class don't like to talk out loud, so I thought it was quite funny cuz he knew everyone- you know he said now YOU can talk and tell me and then everyone was sort of would have- I can imagine put their heads down sort of I don't want to talk

[...]

I was sort of seeing it from his point of view you know he could see that no one really wanted to talk out about the work, so he was using that

#### Informant's Interview

Here Derek was commenting from the lecturer's point of view - 'he could see that no one really wanted to talk out about the work, so he was using that'. His comments pointed to the interpersonal meaning of Eric's utterance, and he regarded this to be a judgement of the students' behaviour. However, of the Chinese students who responded to this extract, (Table 6.4), none noticed any humour. Ning mentioned that she had great difficulty in understanding the lectures because of her poor English proficiency. But the other participants were confident that they had understood what Eric said in Extract 5: most of them mentioned two points, that there was not a simple definition of international business, and that Eric was asking the students to start talking.

In the interview, I tried to pinpoint the location of the humour (see the excerpt of discussion in §6.2.2, where I attempted to lead the students to see where I thought the humour was). The students became confused, and still couldn't think of anything humorous. Eventually May, whose English level was praised by Eric, thought that I was

referring to the fact that Eric was ill. The ironic evaluation in Extract 5, then, was simply not perceived by the participants, including those who showed better understanding of the HEs than other members, such as May. As a result, Eric's interpersonal message addressing what he perceived to be the students' fear of discussing the Al Yamamah deal, was not understood by the Chinese participants.

I suggested in §4.3.3 that in lectures with students from different linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds, there may be a risk in teasing and self-deprecating. There was evidence in the data that the Chinese participants did not always perceive the face work that was going on, and this led to negative consequences. This is evident, for instance, in Extract 4 'good news and better news'. The long discussion amongst Group J in §6.1.3 indicated that they did not know why other people were laughing in the lecture. Presented with the same extract, both the lecturer himself and the informants perceived a self-deprecating attempt by the speaker, whereas the Chinese participants in Group J produced an account of opposition between themselves (Chinese) and the lecturer and native students (foreigners).

This account from the Chinese participants reflects a more general issue - there seemed to be an underlying negative attitude among the Chinese participants towards the faculty. In fact, I was informed by several staff and students during the fieldwork of an on-going tension between the faculty and the Chinese students concerning the latter's weak academic performance. A few of the staff raised with me the issue of the Chinese students' poor English proficiency, and their being inactive in lectures and seminars, while many of my Chinese participants complained about a lack of support from the department. Nevertheless, the lecturer participants in this department were not aware of the gap between their use of humour and the Chinese students' perceptions of this, and appeared to

be insensitive to the Chinese students' lack of knowledge about the context of their humour. These departmental issues may be associated with the Chinese students' incomprehension of stance in humour instances like Extract 4, as the participants mistakenly thought that they were being laughed at in class. But the misunderstanding could also be a symptom: the students were dissatisfied with the department, and hence believed that the lecturer, who represented the department, would hold a negative attitude towards them. In this case, the Chinese students' perceptions of stance in their lecturer's humour would need to be taken into account to address more general inter-cultural teaching and learning issues in this particular department.

Another recurrent issue in the students' accounts of humour is that stance is considered to be a peripheral or unnecessary part of the message conveyed. For example, also in Extract 4, two participants made the remarks below referring to the idea that having the last lecture was good news to the students:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>Gao: 其实对我们来说, 是不是他上最后一节课, 就跟好不好笑没有关系, 我觉得是知道一个消息, 一个 news 而已</p> <p>[...]</p> | <p>in fact to us, if it is [Eric's] last lecture has nothing to do with if it is funny or not, I think it's just knowing a piece of information, it's only news</p> <p>[...]</p> |
| <p>Jun: 他没什么好事不好事, 只不过他要陈述这样一个事实</p>   | <p>To [Eric], there's nothing good or bad, he is only stating a fact</p>   |

Interview data (Group J)

Gao made the comment above suggesting that, as a student, he only cared about the teaching-related message, i.e. this was the last lecture. This comment was echoed later by Jun, who did not consider that Eric was expressing any stance. Gao and Jun expressed the

same view, from the students' and lecturer's perspectives respectively, that nothing apart from the teaching-related message was relevant in Eric's utterance in Extract 4. A similar idea was raised concerning Extract 11. In this extract, Eric makes a comparison between human and dog cultures, which depicts the latter's advantages over the former. I asked the participants in Group F whether there was any evidence of Eric's stance in this comparison.

- |           |   |  |
|-----------|---|--|
| 1 Can:    | 我们没有觉得他那个有什么自己的立场在里面, 我觉得他就是-   | I don't think [Eric] has his stance, I think he's just-  |
| 2 Eli:    | 用更好的理解, 就方便而已   | [the example] is for better understanding, only for convenience  |
| 3 Can:    | 对, 找一个例子来, 也没有  | yeah, just an example, no  |
| 4 YW:     | 你不觉得他有什么自己的立场对吧   | you don't think he's got a stance  |
| 5 Norman: | 因为我想听的是, 他说怎么说, international business, 我明白什么什么 international business 就好 | because what I want to hear, I mean, international business, I understand so and so about international business, that's enough                    |
| 6 Can:    | 嗯, 对  | yeah   |
| 7 Norman: | 所以我不觉得他说狗或者什么会有特别的意思<br><br>[...]   | I don't think he means anything special talking about dogs<br><br>[...]  |
| 8 Can:    | 我们学这个他没有必要延伸更多的东西嘛, 他只是就讲课来说, 就是他讲明白了, 让我们来懂就可以了                          | we're learning this and he does not need to extend too much, he's just lecturing, and if he can make it clear, and we understand it, that's enough |

Interview (Group F)

The participants considered Eric's reference to dogs to be a convenient example, and that he was not expressing any stance in his comparison between dogs and human beings. In addition, Norman and Can both believed that Eric's major task was to make the students understand what was being taught, so expressing his own stance was beyond this task, hence unnecessary. This view resonates with Gao and Jun in the discussion of Extract 4. They all considered the lecturer's stance to be a peripheral element in the HEs.

The belief that stance is peripheral is problematic. Based on my observations of and conversations with Eric, I noticed that he was an enthusiastic dog lover. He also admitted in the interview that his love of dogs was the reason why he used them as an example in Extract 11. However, none of my Chinese participants appeared to be aware of Eric's love of dogs, despite the fact that it was obvious - he had pictures of dogs on the wall of his office, and would sometimes mention his dogs in lectures. The Chinese participants' ignorance of this information indicated their unfamiliarity with Eric.

Furthermore, it has been suggested in §4.3.3 that humour often embodies social values, especially relating to taboos in a society, in this case the humour of repression. The review of the BASE data reveals that repression is a common form of humour in the lectures, and it entails a wide range of topics including sex, bodily functions and alcohol. These topics are not usually talked about openly in a society. As such, understanding social values indirectly expressed through humour becomes an important channel through which international students learn about a foreign society. In return, learning about the sociocultural context aids the students' comprehension of humour, as discussed in Extract 2 'an Englishman in a karaoke bar', alluding to the drinking culture in Britain (see §5.2.1). As none of the Chinese participants were aware of this allusion, they had missed a chance to learn from it.

## 6.2.4. Common experiences and feelings

A theme that often appeared in the Chinese participants' accounts of humour was that of common experiences or feelings. They identified humour in the teacher's allusion to something familiar and usual in their daily lives. This theme was not something I expected at the start of the research. For example, In Extract 1 'a strong form of integrative motivation', Pan described Amy's story as 'common' and 'familiar'. Commenting on another HE Extract 7 'how to break bad news' (see §5.3.4 or Appendix 5), Shen made the remark below:

Shen: Things happen in our daily life. And the teacher can use a simple, explicit way to express these insignificant incidents, events or even emotions.

RR

Extract 12 'learning to ride a bicycle' (see Appendix 5) is another typical example of humour deriving from shared experiences, in which Amy tells an anecdote of how she learned to ride a bicycle. After listening to this extract, all three of the Chinese (Mainland) participants (Table 6.1) noticed humour, and their accounts of the humour all entailed, among other things, the sharing of certain experiences or feelings:

Ping: The lecturer describes her brother's response to her when she fell off the bike. It's the reaction made by every boy.

Her mother counted her bruises and was afraid that the teacher might think she was beaten by her parents severely.

Lin: the example of the lecturer's experience in learning to ride bicycles has 2 points which are humorous. The 1<sup>st</sup> one is that her brother made fun of her when she fell down. Because such experience aroused common feeling of childhood and another point is that the bruises



on her body would be misunderstood as the bad treatment from parents.

Su: 说话者谈话的内容可以让你感觉亲切、可爱，并且可以自然联想到的情景 The content of the speech makes you feel familiar and amiable, and you can automatically imagine the scenario.

RR

Here, touches of nostalgia for childhood emerged from the participants' accounts. For Ping and Lin, the anecdote in Extract 12 involved other aspects of humour, e.g. the brother's laugh, and the fear of being identified as a battered child. Su, who on several occasions confessed her insufficient English proficiency (see §6.2.2), clearly understood this extract very well, as she could recount the anecdote accurately. Her account of humour in Extract 12 foregrounded the 'familiar and amiable' feeling:

Su: 然后那个什么她妈妈 horrible，但是她自己比较 proud 的，然后还包含了一点点那个小 challenge 在里面，包含了一点疼痛在里面，这个虽然好笑吧，我觉得是 slightly 吧，然后他们那个感觉有点又挺心疼，又觉得又比较倔强的一个小姑娘浮现在你的眼前，然后从这里我觉得幽默，我觉得就是说能让你感觉到亲切可爱的，能够让你联想到一种情景，这种情景可以激发你内心深处某种，内心最深处的那根弦吧，可以拨动你内心深处的一根弦 And then something like her mum feels horrible, but she is proud, and there is a bit of challenge in it, a bit of pain in it, this is funny, but I think it is only slightly, and then they cherish [the girl], then I can see the image of a stubborn girl, and this is what I find humorous, I think it makes you feel familiar and amiable, it allows you to imagine the scenario, and this scenario can trigger something deep in your heart, or maybe the heartstrings, it pulls on your heartstrings

Group discussion (Group A)

In fact, common experience was a recurrent theme in Group A's discussion of Amy's humour. The discussion below concerns a different episode by Amy:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1 Su: 第五个好像就是说，她刚好举了一些例子[...] 她可能有些例子跟我们每个人身上或多或少都会有一点自己的影子在里面，可能会觉得稍微有一点有意思，只是 slightly slightly, 一点点意思在里面 | what happened in this one was that, she just gives some examples [...] I feel she gives some examples which may reflect more or less of our own experiences, there may be a tiny bit of something interesting, but it's only slightly, a little bit interesting |
| 2 Lin: 嗯  | hmm   |
| 3 Ping: 我觉得她这个不幽默，只是联系实际情况说明一件事情  | I think this isn't humour, she is only referring to reality to explain something  |
| 4 Lin: 但是你不觉得她说的什么跟你有一个切合点的时候   | but don't you feel that when she says something that coincides with your experience   |
| 5 Ping: 你只是很认同  | you only feel it agreeable  |
| 6 Lin: 你会笑一下吗，就好像讲到了你的心里话了一样  | you would laugh a bit, it's like saying the words in your heart   |
| 7 Ping: 噢 I see what you mean   | oh I see what you mean  |

Group discussion (group A)

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 8 Ping: 我老觉得啊，我觉得像 Amy 讲的那种故事，其实你要是很平淡得叙述一下也就完了，但是她就能找出一些点让你觉得挺有共鸣的 | I always feel that stories like those Amy told, you can just tell them plainly and that's it, but she can always find something that you can resonate with |
|---|--|

Group discussion (Group A)

Su's English proficiency, as she admitted, was low. Nevertheless, she could identify parts

in the extracts that were familiar to her, and found humour in them. A speculative explanation may be that, when someone is exposed to and puzzled by an alien environment, anything that is familiar stands out. Also, Amy's humour is prepared and explicit (see §5.1.2 and §5.2.1) in Extracts 1 and 12, and therefore easy for the Chinese students to understand. In both examples, almost all the Chinese participants appeared to understand Amy's humour well. However, this does not mean the humour is always appreciated. I suggested in §6.2.1 that Yan found her story in Extract 1 boring.

### **6.3 Summary and conclusion**

I have demonstrated in this chapter that humour in many HEs was not identified by the Chinese participants, especially in HEs without laughter. On these occasions, the participants failed to notice any cues of humour. When humour was identified, the participants' perceptions were often very different from my own analysis of the discourse in Chapter 5 and from the lecturers' accounts included in Chapters 5 and 6. This did not necessarily mean that the students had failed to comprehend the humour. Humour comprehension is not an all-or-nothing matter. I suggested, first, that humour bears multiple interpretations. Secondly, identifying humour does not require good understanding of it, and humour may also be appreciated even if listeners do not understand it, fully or even at all. This finding to some extent supports Nerhardt's (1976) and Decker's (1993) argument that incongruity without resolution is capable of eliciting humour (also see §2.2.1). The converse of this is also the case, humour that is understood is not always appreciated. Such findings give rise to the questions of if and how we can assess listeners' competence in comprehending humour. The findings also lead me to review the initial hypothesis of this thesis, that Chinese students have difficulty in

comprehending and may even be unaware of humour in British lectures. My participants did show problems of humour comprehension in class. But their understandings vary in many ways, and not all lack of comprehension is considered to be negative by the students or lecturers themselves. I will review the initial hypothesis in more detail in the final chapter.

In the playback and discussion sessions, some participants tried to explain their incomprehension of humour in the HEs. The most frequently mentioned reason was their low English competence, such as lack of vocabulary and unfamiliarity with certain accents. Also, a few students mentioned the perplexity of ‘British humour’ as compared to ‘Chinese humour’. However, as I showed in §6.2.2, there were many instances of the Chinese participants’ humour in the playback and discussion sessions that resonated with humour of their British lecturers. The Chinese students in my study stereotype British people and auto-stereotype. Various studies have reported similar behaviour of Chinese students in Britain, relating this to their lack of intercultural interaction with British people. My participants’ stereotypical accounts in the research context reflects this widely reported socialising pattern of Chinese students in Britain, which, as I will argue in the final chapter, needs further academic attention.

In Chapter 4, I commented that humour, like all language uses, is evaluative. The expression of a speaker’s stance is heightened by humour – here, in the lecturers’ discourse. However, the student data showed that the Chinese participants evidently differed from their lecturers in their accounts of stance and face acts in many HEs. In several cases, self-deprecation or irony was simply overlooked, despite the fact that the students understood the teaching-related messages. In other examples, the students noticed face work but mistook the target of this. Commenting on one HE, the participants (Group J) believed that

they were the target of the lecturer's humour, and produced an account of opposition between themselves (Chinese) and the lecturer and British students (foreigners). The participants also perceived sociocultural allusions in the HEs very differently from their lecturers. Furthermore, the participants' remarks sometimes suggested that they considered stance to be peripheral or unnecessary to the message conveyed. I argue that this view is problematic as humour is an important and ubiquitous resource for the students to learn about hidden norms of a society.

To sum up, the data analysis in this chapter shows that the Chinese students had evident problems in identifying and/or understanding humour in lectures. First of all they were often unaware of their lecturers' humour, especially when it was not responded to with laughter. Their perceptions of stance and face facts in the HEs were often inconsistent with those of their lecturers. When they reflected on the reasons for their incomprehension of humour, they tended to attribute it to inadequate English competence. Some participants also referred to a monolithic distinction between 'British humour' and 'Chinese humour'. Some of them expressed the view that stance was an unimportant element in the lecturers' speech. In Chapter 7, I will further discuss the implications of these findings.



## **7. Conclusion**

In this final chapter of my thesis, I aim to summarise the main findings of this study and discuss its implications and contribution to knowledge. I firstly summarise the main findings, relating these to the first four research questions set out in §1.3. The final question is addressed in §7.2, where the implications of the study are discussed. This thesis represents, to my knowledge, one of the first qualitative investigations of humour in British lectures. The only published investigation that I know of into this subject, Nesi (2012), emerged at the late stage of the writing of my thesis. Nesi studies only transcripts of lectures in the British Academic Spoken English (BASE) corpus. My methodology, however, combines discourse of lectures with student and lecturer data. This thesis has raised many new questions for future study of humour in British academic lectures. I point out these questions in §7.2, and suggest possibilities for future research.

### **7.1 Summary of main findings**

#### **7.1.1. What are the formal and functional properties of humour in the BASE lectures?**

The analysis of the BASE data in Chapter 4 revealed the complexity of humour in the lectures concerning its forms and functions. Formal properties at the levels of word/sentence, text, and paralanguage were coded. Humour at word/sentence level such as punning and other forms of word play is not common in the BASE data. At text level, stories/anecdotes and quips (see §4.3.1) are two frequent forms identified in BASE. Paralanguage is a prominent property of humour in BASE. Changes of vocal features reflexively draw attention to the words and phrases uttered, but paralanguage, especially in

the forms of facial expressions and kinesic movements, can also be an independent factor of humour, e.g. in slapstick comedies. However, BASE provided limited resources for systematic analysis of paralanguage.

In the functional dimension of humour, numerous studies show that humour in lectures is used for interpersonal and task-oriented purposes (see §4.3.3 and §5.2). Interpersonal functions of humour are ubiquitous in BASE. Analysis of the HEs reveals that humour is a versatile means to benefit self-image, to tackle critical moments of face loss (§2.4.2), to mitigate face-threatening acts (FTAs) (§2.4.2), and to enhance solidarity with students. Teasing (see §4.3.3) targeted at others and oneself is ubiquitous in the BASE data. This type of humour ‘bites’ and ‘bonds’ at the same time. Humour heightens stance in language. Stance in humour is often implicitly expressed, and reflects the speaker's and listeners' shared awareness of the implied meaning. Moreover, as stance in humour often reflects sociocultural values, especially those involving taboo topics, it also indicates the speaker's and listeners' shared awareness of these sociocultural values. Through invoking something in common between conversationalists, humour may contribute to in-group positive face.

Another common characteristic of humour arising from my data analysis is the invocation of imaginary or alternative realities. Following Cook (2000), I consider alternative realities to be a property of humour in the semantic dimension. This property is strongly associated with incongruity, an essential characteristic of humour (see detailed discussion in §4.3.2).

### **7.1.2. Building on the study of the BASE data, what are the functions of humour in the Small Corpus?**

The investigation of the first research question using the BASE data prepared the work on



developing and analysing the Small Corpus (§3.4.1). I collected the Small Corpus data myself, and talked to the lecturers and some students. The incorporation of better contextual knowledge and the students' and lecturers' accounts of humour enabled a fuller review of its functions as demonstrated in Chapter 5. The interpersonal functions of humour were ubiquitous in the Small Corpus. The lecturers used humour to perform FTAs (§2.4.2), to enhance rapport with the students, to encourage their active engagement, and meanwhile maintain control over long interactions. Some functions of humour emerged in the Small Corpus that were not salient in the BASE data. One example of these was the task-based functions of humour in lectures. Teaching and learning are the primary task in lectures. But it was difficult to observe how humour facilitated teaching tasks based on the BASE resources (see discussion in §4.3.3). As for the Small Corpus, the lecturers' reflections on their uses of humour foregrounded the teaching tasks. The analysis in Chapter 5 showed that humour in the Small Corpus data functioned in a wide variety of ways to facilitate teaching and socialising in lectures. Humour in the forms of stories/anecdotes and role-play was a teaching tool. This means, firstly, that it was used to illustrate an idea or a concept being taught. Secondly, stories/anecdotes and role-play activities were often planned, repeated, and sometimes expected by the lecturers to trigger laughter in the audience. Another function common in the Small Corpus but not the BASE data was that humour served as breaks in class. It was a 'fairground' in which the lecturers and students could relax and be themselves. This somewhat ludic function emerged in two lecturers' accounts of their uses of humour.

Based on the analysis of the BASE data, I developed an analytical framework of humour in the lectures (§4.3). As the analysis of the Small Corpus gave rise to more functions of humour in lectures, a refined analytical framework was developed:

<b>Dimensions of analysis</b>	<b>Analytical level</b>
Formal dimension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• word/sentence level</li> <li>• text</li> <li>• paralanguage</li> </ul>
Semantic dimension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• play with meaning including the invocation of alternative realities</li> </ul>
Functional dimension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• interpersonal aspects of humour (interpreted in terms of face acts and the expression of stance)</li> <li>• Task-based aspects of humour</li> <li>• Ludic aspects of humour (lecturers and students take humour as breaks in class to relax, have fun, and be themselves)</li> </ul>

### **7.1.3. How do the Chinese students in the study perceive humour in the lectures?**

Humour in many episodes was not identified by the Chinese participants, especially those without laughter. When humour was identified, the participants' perceptions were often very different from my analysis of the discourse and from the lecturers' accounts. But this did not necessarily mean that the students had failed to comprehend the humour. Humour bears multiple interpretations. The participants' perceptions represented one or some of the many interpretations of the humour. Moreover, there was evidence that the participants could in some ways identify and appreciate the humour without understanding it. In the playback and discussion sessions, some participants tried to explain their incomprehension of humour in the HEs. The most often mentioned reason was their low English competence, such as lack of vocabulary and unfamiliarity with certain accents. Also, a few participants

talked about the perplexity of 'British humour' as compared to 'Chinese humour'.

However, there were instances of the Chinese participants' humour in the playback and discussion sessions that resonated with humour of their British lecturers.

The Chinese participants evidently differed from their lecturers on accounts of stance expressed and face acts in many HEs. In several cases, self-deprecation or irony was simply overlooked, despite the fact that the students understood the message directly related to the teaching points (details in §6.2.3). In other examples, the students noticed face work but mistook its target. There was evidence of negative impacts caused by misunderstanding face act humour in lectures. The participants also perceived sociocultural allusions in the HEs very differently from their lecturers. However, often the participants' remarks suggested that they considered stance to be peripheral or unnecessary to the message conveyed. One theme that often appeared in the Chinese participants' accounts of humour was that of common experiences or feelings. The participants, including those who expressed concern over their low English proficiency, identified humour in the lecturers' allusion to something familiar and usual in their daily life.

#### **7.1.4. How do the lecturers in this study account for their use of humour in the lectures?**

The lecturers accounted for their use of humour in the same HEs as the Chinese students did. Humour was identified in all of the episodes by the lecturers. The lecturers tended to centre their accounts of the humour around teaching. According to them, the humour was used to draw the students' interest (Amy on her use of anecdotes in §5.1.2), to 'lighten up the atmosphere' (Amy on Extract 1 'a strong form of integrative motivation'), to enhance memory (John on Extract 3 'a telephone conversation'), and to refresh the students in class

(Andy on his use of humour in general in §5.4). As well as using humour to facilitate teaching, the lecturers also consciously deployed humour as interpersonal strategies for the sake of rapport with their students. For example, Eric invited the students to laugh at him in Extract 4 ‘good news and better news’; in Extract 5 ‘the Al Yamamah deal’, he threatens the students’ face (§2.4.2) in a playful way. Another lecturer, Andy, enjoyed sharing his backstage thoughts with his students (§5.4). Another use of humour, which was raised by both Andy and John, was that the lecturers wanted to create breaks in class. Andy and John both explained that they wanted to have fun in the lectures themselves, but realised that this could be ‘selfish’ (Andy) and ‘not very professional’ (John) (§5.4).

The lecturers’ accounts of their humour showed that they were often aware of the existence of international students in class, and would accommodate these students’ needs in teaching. One example was Eric’s reasons for choosing the story in Extract 2 ‘an Englishman in a karaoke bar’. Furthermore, some of the lecturers could recall experiences when their international students, including Chinese students, reacted to their humour differently than British students. Despite the fact that the lecturers were conscious of their international students’ different needs, they were often unaware of the gaps between their uses of humour and the students’ perceptions of them, and some appeared to be insensitive to the latter’s feelings of being alienated.

## **7.2 Implications and future research**

This thesis is first of all a study of humour, so I start the discussion in this section with how the thesis contributes to the study of humour. The idea of the thesis was derived from my experience of failing to understand humour in British academic lectures, so I then discuss how it contributes to Chinese students’ understanding of humour in British lectures. The

focus in this part is on the students. Then I discuss how this study sheds light on Chinese students' experience overseas, and calls for reflection on Chinese students' purposes of learning English and studying overseas. Finally, I talk about the study's implications for the internationalisation of British higher education. In the last two parts, I extend to point out how this study can contribute to British universities with Chinese students, their lecturers and other staff.

I have elaborated in Chapter 3 that despite certain uniformity across the 39 Chinese participants in the research, they could not adequately represent the large population of Chinese students in Britain. My study was an indicative one aiming to identify and illustrate potential humour-related problems pertaining to Chinese students in Britain. This awareness underlies my discussion of implications below. This said, the implications of this study in many ways are not restricted to Chinese students. They may be applied to other international students, and investigations are required to explore how my study can be generalised to benefit non-Chinese international students in Britain.

### **7.2.1. Implications for the study of humour**

#### **Humour in institutional contexts**

As introduced in Chapters 2 and 3, many linguistic studies of humour and language creativity/play aim to develop universal frameworks for analysing these subjects, e.g. Attardo's (1994) GTVH (§2.4.3) and Maybin and Swann's (2007a) three-dimensional framework for language creativity (§3.2.3). Only a small body of work, e.g. Janet Holmes' humour in the workplace (§2.3.1) and Nancy D. Bell's work on humour in language classrooms (Bell, 2009b; Pomerantz and Bell, 2007), has accounted for humour in close relation to its contexts. This thesis adds to this body of work by scrutinising humour in an

institutional context, i.e. academic lectures. The data in both BASE and the Small Corpus show that humour is closely embedded in institutional tasks in lectures. It plays an important role in the relational activities between teachers and students, and also directly facilitates teaching and learning. In some examples, humour is prepared and repeated over time by the lecturers. In this respect, humour has important institutional or task-based functions in academic lectures. A handful of studies, including Holmes' and Bell's works mentioned above, have provided qualitative evidence to challenge a somewhat common view that humour and play are ludic and hence not constructive in institutional contexts. This thesis supports this challenge by providing new evidence.

### **Defining humour in and beyond the researched context**

My study follows an inductive approach to defining humour in British academic lectures: instead of developing a standard definition, I set up rules for identifying instances of humour in my data (see the methodological discussion in §1.2 and §3.4.2; see the rules for identifying humour instances in §3.2.2 and §3.3.2). This approach takes into account the highly complex and context-dependent nature of humour (see §2.2 for the major theoretical discussions of the nature of humour) and foregrounds the researcher's role in identifying and interpreting humour (see further discussion in §3.3.4). Meanwhile, the rules I set up can enable comparisons and conciliations between different studies. Following this inductive approach, I developed a characterisation of humour in my study. The content and process of developing the characterisation are recapitulated below.

Adopting Holmes' (2000) definition of humour (shown below) as a working definition, I set out to search for instances of humour in the BASE corpus and Small Corpus.

Incidences of humour included in this analysis are utterances which are identified by the analyst, on the basis of paralinguistic, prosodic and discoursal clues, as intended by the speaker(s) to be amusing and perceived to be amusing by at least some participants.

(ibid. :163)

The large amount of data in BASE gave rise to some recurrent qualities of what have been identified as humour. Later, I recorded and developed the Small Corpus. Better contextual and 'insider' knowledge of the lectures in the Small Corpus allowed me to recognise new significant qualities of humour that were not salient in the BASE data. A characterisation of the humour in my study was achieved by adding all these qualities to the working definition:

- Humour in my study is represented by humour episodes (HEs) identified in the BASE corpus and the Small Corpus developed by myself. They are the lecturers' utterances identified by me based on lexical, textual, paralinguistic, and discoursal cues as perceived to be amusing by myself and/or at least some participants in the lectures.
- All HEs in my study incorporate the interplay between incongruous formal, semantic, and/or functional properties, and between the properties and the institutional context of a lecture.
- Humour in the lectures has several important functions. First of all, it is used to carry out interpersonal activities, in which the lecturers self-deprecate, tease the students and joke about someone absent in the classroom to develop and maintain rapport with the students. Humour in the lectures is also an important teaching tool: it is used to illustrate and explain teaching points; interesting stories/anecdotes are prepared and delivered; role-play activities involving the lecturer and students are

carried out. Last but not least, some lecturers in the Small Corpus use humour constantly in lectures to establish a 'fairground' to relax and entertain themselves and the students. Face acts and expression of stance are two important concepts in the functional analysis of humour in the lectures.

However, it can be seen that the formal, semantic, and functional features described in the characterisation above are not unique to humour. Telling a horror story in which the ghost appears unexpectedly may well incorporate the above features, but it is not usually considered as humour. With this account, a universal definition of humour beyond the context of my research may not be achieved through referring to the formal, semantic, and functional features of its language.

Wallace Chafe approaches the task of defining humour by attributing it to a feeling or emotion - '[humour] is a way of intentionally eliciting the feeling of nonseriousness' (Chafe, 2007:1). He describes the feeling of nonseriousness as 'a reaction to situations it would be counterproductive to take seriously, with the result that they are rejected as candidates for inclusion in one's repertoire of knowledge about the way the world is' (ibid.:13). A sense of nonseriousness did appear as a common feeling in the lecturers' accounts of their use of humour in the Small Corpus (Amy described her story in Extract 1 as exaggerating in §5.2.1; Eric played a 'game' in Extract 4 in §5.3.1; Andy saw his lectures as a 'fairground' in §5.4). The Chinese students also at times pointed out that the humour delivered messages that were not serious ('that is exaggeration' by Ping in §6.1.4; 'he is saying the opposite' by Bee in §6.1.3). Nonetheless, some of the Chinese students also found humour in the teacher's allusion to something familiar and usual in their daily life (§6.2.4). What was humour to them, in this respect, was faithful to their real experience and feelings, hence serious in Chafe's (ibid.) sense. Further research is needed to



investigate if humour can derive from common experiences and feelings, and if this potential source of humour involves cultural differences. If common experiences and feelings can be regarded as a feature of humour, its definition needs to go beyond the feeling of nonseriousness.

### **Humour in intercultural communication**

This thesis explores an under-examined subject - humour in intercultural communication. Only a small body of work, e.g. Bell (2005, 2007a, 2007b), Chiaro (2009), Davies (2003), Forman (2011), Holmes and Hay (1997), Kozlova (2008), Marra and Holmes (2007), has qualitatively investigated this subject. These studies show, on the one hand, problems caused by humour in the intercultural contexts, and on the other that, despite the problems, successful communication occurs. Some of my Chinese participants showed capacity to tolerate humour-related problems, as they could appreciate and laugh at humour that they did not fully understand. This was consistent with Bell's (2007a) finding that her participants, who were non-native speakers of English, could make adjustments in interaction with native speakers, and that misunderstanding of humour seldom caused conflict. However, some of my participants reacted negatively to their incomprehension of humour in lectures (see Group J's data in §6.1.3). This might be because in lectures, the students had far less resources to control the communication and react to insufficient understanding. Existing studies of English learners' experience of humour in intercultural contexts, which include the studies mentioned above by Bell, Davies, Forman, and Kozlova, all focus on interaction between the learners and native speakers. My study concerns lectures - an asymmetric and relatively less interactive mode of communication, and thus contributes knowledge to achieve a fuller picture of how humour plays a role in intercultural contexts.

The British lecturers in my study expressed their awareness that international students had different needs in lectures. They could even describe how the students' needs had been accommodated for in their use of humour (see Eric's interview data in §6.1.2). However, gaps were still evident between their use of humour and the Chinese students' perceptions of this. These gaps, despite efforts to avoid them, reflect the fact that humour inevitably generates diverse interpretations in intercultural communication. In fact, this is also true in intra-cultural communication: my British informants sometimes interpreted humour differently from the lecturers (Derek's account of Extract 5 'the Al Yamamah deal' in §6.2.3 was to some extent different from Eric's). In addition to producing knowledge of humour in intercultural communication at a more general level, my study also revealed some perceptions of humour which could be specially 'Chinese'. For example, the Chinese participants' accounts of Extract 2 'an Englishman in a karaoke bar' invoked the status of karaoke in Chinese urban life. Another example was the participants' ascription to common experiences or feelings accounting for humour (§6.2.4). One may associate this finding with a common but somewhat controversial observation on China as a collectivist society, in which harmony is valued (cf. Cortazzi and Jin, 1997; Hofstede, 1986). Attardo (2008a) describes linguistic enquiries of humour in specific cultures as a thriving but 'shockingly under-examined' domain (ibid.:133). Studies of humour in contemporary Chinese society are scarce (see §2.2.2). This thesis indicates possibility of conducting such research.

### **Methodological contribution**

My study combines an existing language corpus, BASE, with a small corpus recorded by myself (for the methodological discussion see §3.4.1). The large amount of data in BASE prepared the work on the Small Corpus in terms of the identification and coding of HEs. But BASE contains inherent limitations in respect of its transcriptions and contextual

information (see §3.2.4). The Small Corpus was developed to test the findings derived from the BASE data. Better contextual knowledge of the data collected by myself allowed me to do analysis in ways that cannot be achieved with the BASE data (see §3.4.1). This approach to triangulating two corpora benefited from the advantage of a large corpus, and meanwhile compensated to a certain level the shortcoming, as Attardo (2008a:125) points out, that most existing large corpora have not been annotated for humour research.

In addition to corpus data, my study combines three perspectives of humour in lectures - the researcher's (partly informed by British informants and informants who used English outside of language classrooms; see §3.3.2), Chinese students', and lecturers' perspectives (for the methodological discussion see §3.3.4). This approach constructs a triangular perspective integrating analysis of discourse and information sender and receiver perceptions, and has been adopted in research into debate over food politics (Cook et al., 2004; Cook et al., 2009; Cook et al., 2006) and discourse of radio advertisements (Hmensa, 2010). It has, however, not been widely employed in humour research, with the exceptions of Kozlova (2008) and Nelms (2001), which adopt a similar combination of perspectives but do not hold a strong focus on analysis of discourse. In my study, the triangular approach partly mitigated bias of any one or two of the perspectives, took into account the fact that humour always generated multiple interpretations, and demonstrated effectively the gaps between interpretations from the different perspectives. In this sense, my study sheds lights on a new approach to researching conversational humour.

### **7.2.2. Implications for Chinese students' understanding of humour in**

#### **British academic lectures**

The Chinese students in my study had many problems of understanding and were even

unaware of humour in the British lectures. The humour, according to my analysis and the lecturers' accounts, was used to facilitate teaching and manage rapport. In this respect, it was important to the students in terms of both their study and socialisation. Further studies should be carried out to investigate if Chinese and other international students in other British university departments also encounter difficulty in understanding humour in lectures. If such difficulty is noticed, learning from the experience in developing the analytical framework of humour (see §7.1.2) in my research, we may build frameworks of a similar type in the new contexts to facilitate pinpointing problematic aspects of humour to international students. Students can be instructed to describe humour taking into account the formal, semantic, and functional properties in the analytical framework. The researcher can then identify particularly problematic properties.

My study found that expression of stance in the lecturers' humour, especially their sociocultural allusions, was particularly problematic to the Chinese students. Humour often invokes social values that are hidden in a society. Understanding these values through humour becomes an important channel of learning about a foreign society. In this sense, Chinese students in Britain should learn the sociocultural knowledge for better understanding of both their lectures and British society, if not for other purposes.

Nonetheless, as demonstrated in §6.2.3, the students in my study tended to think that the lecturers' major task was to deliver the course content, and stance was peripheral to this task. This view then also dismissed the necessity to learn about sociocultural values embraced by their lecturers through humour.

My study did not explore if the students learned about British society outside lectures, but various studies of Chinese students in Britain have raised a common issue that they experience very limited intercultural interaction with British people outside the classroom

(Edwards and An, 2006; Gu, 2009; Robson and Turner, 2007; Spencer-Oatey and Xiong, 2006; Tian and Lowe, 2009). This issue agrees with my observations in the field that most Chinese students tended to stick together wherever they went. With this account, the Chinese students simply did not have many opportunities of learning about the customs, belief and values existent in British society - the aspects that are often referred to as 'small culture' (Holliday, 1999) (this concept of culture is used here with a pinch of salt as people grouped according to nationality, religion, region, institution, etc. are never homogeneous; a detailed discussion of culture and language can be found in §3.4.4.).

My research, together with the studies of Chinese students in Britain mentioned above, indicates a tendency for the students to dismiss or resist learning about British culture and probably any other cultures. As culture and language are closely intertwined (§3.4.4), this tendency is in line with a wider shift of the status of English in the contemporary world, which is signified by the growing attempt to treat English as an international language or a *lingua franca* (ELF). This shift sees that the majority of English learners nowadays, rather than being interested in the culture of native speakers, use the language to communicate with other non-native speakers at international business meetings, conferences, etc. As such, the English used by learners does not need to approximate native English speakers' norm, and can be a culturally neutral language (Jenkins, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2001, 2011). If learning about British culture was only for the sake of conformity, and conformity was no longer required in English learning, there would be little meaning for Chinese students in Britain to learn about the culture through humour in or outside lectures. As such, individual or sociocultural stances expressed in lecturers' humour may well be peripheral as my Chinese participants believed. In addition, humour used for mainly ludic reasons, i.e. humour for the sake of entertaining rather than teaching course content, such as Extract 9

‘woo’, may be ignored. However, knowing a new culture does not necessarily and, in fact, often does not lead to conformity to the target culture (Fenner, 2000, 2008). There are other reasons to learn about a foreign culture. I will discuss these reasons in §7.2.2-3.

The final implication I would like to raise in this section concerns if and how we can assess competence in humour comprehension in lectures. Identifying humour does not require good understanding of it, and once it is identified, one can appreciate it even if he/she does not understand it, fully or even at all. Furthermore, humour understood is not always appreciated. My research findings indicate the complexity of assessing competence in humour comprehension, which has been pointed out by Bell (cf. Bell, 2007b; Bell and Attardo, 2010). A conversationalist, in either intra or intercultural contexts, can fail to comprehend an instance of humour in many ways. Bell and Attardo (2010) further suggest seven levels ‘at which a speaker may fail to engage in a humorous exchange’ (ibid.:430), including failure to understand the meaning of a word and the incongruity of a joke. This type of classification is needed for future investigation of humour competence.

Hay (2001) and Bell (2007b) both show that humour comprehension is socially affected. My research produced evidence of this claim. One of the potential social factors arose in my study was the students’ perceptions of a lecturer: the students were more likely to identify and appreciate a lecturer’s humour if he/she was known as a humorous person (§6.2.1). Another potential factor was the students’ degree of satisfaction with the department: if they were unsatisfied with the department, they were less likely to laugh with the lecturers who represented the department (§6.2.3). Humour comprehension has been associated with communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) by scholars such as Bell (2002, 2005). She suggests that language learners’ ability to create humour may represent ‘the pinnacle of achievement of communicative competence’ (Bell, 2002:308). Bell (2005)

further provides qualitative evidence to show how language play can benefit English learners' sociolinguist competence. However, communicative language teaching emphasises native speakers' norms (Savignon, 2006). This emphasis has been criticised by ELF proponents, as discussed above. If native speakers' norms are no longer regarded to be the standard norms of communication in a second language, assessing language learners' humour comprehension as an aspect of communicative competence becomes problematic. In this respect, the findings of my research create yet more difficulties of assessing humour competence.

### **7.2.3. Implications for Chinese students' motivation for English learning and overseas study**

As I mentioned in the prior section, the Chinese students in my study tended to think that teaching content in lectures was important, but the lecturers' stance expressed in humour and its sociocultural allusions were peripheral. Humour in the lectures was sometimes closely connected to the teaching content in the lectures (§5.2), but often the connection was not explicit. For instance, the self-deprecation in Extract 4 'good news and better news' conveys an interpersonal message, which is separable from the actual 'news' regarding Eric's last lecture; in Extract 8 'mutator', the humour temporarily breaks away from the on-going teaching task. Humour of such type was more likely to be overlooked or ignored by the Chinese students, which was what happened to these two examples. The students' dismissal of humour resonated with the finding of Spencer-Oatey and Xiong (2006), in which the Chinese students rated understanding humour in English as the most difficult thing to them in Britain, but it was not included in the top ten most important things, which were all study-related.

In Spencer-Oatey and Xiong's and my studies, the Chinese students' focus of their overseas experience was academic study, and they felt this did not involve understanding humour in English. Dismissal of humour is also evident in academic support for international students' English academic listening. Scholars such as Flowerdew (Flowerdew, 1994; Flowerdew and Miller, 2005) and Lynch (1994, 2009) have attended to international students' comprehension of lectures, and pointed out the challenges they have of identifying course structures and coping with speed and note-taking (a review of such studies can be found in Lynch (2011)). These studies concern mainly understanding course content. Understanding humour or in fact any kind of interpersonal or cultural messages in lectures are not addressed. In addition, the growing ELF studies also foreground the transactions for which English is used by non-native speakers (international students' listening in British academic lectures can be considered as one of such transactions<sup>49</sup>), and regard its cultural element, which has been regrettably dominated by Anglophone countries, as irrelevant.

The movement towards separating culture from language responds to the over-emphasis on native speakers' norms in the once dominant and still prevalent tradition of communicative language teaching (Savignon, 2006). This emphasis politically disempowered non-native speakers of English and did not reflect how they use the language nowadays. Indeed, Chinese students' focus on their academic study is not surprising. After all, they pay a considerable price to study overseas hoping that the experience will benefit their future development. The over-emphasis on native speakers' norms is problematic and has been

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<sup>49</sup> A *lingua franca* encounter is usually considered to be one that involves only non-native speakers of the language being used to communicate (Meierkord, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2001). Recently, some researchers start to include in ELF encounters interactions between native and non-native speakers of English (Dewey and Jenkins, 2010). According to this extended sense of it, international students' communication with British lecturers in lectures can be regarded as an ELF encounter.



criticised by ELF scholars (Jenkins, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2001, 2011) and recently by Cook (2010) with an attempt to revive translation in language teaching. Nevertheless, emphasis on academic study to the level of excluding interpersonal and cultural exchanges such as humour is equally problematic.

Studying overseas and learning a foreign language lead to reflection on one's own identity. This is inevitable and can bring inspiring outcomes that are different from the language and academic knowledge learned and degree gained. Knowing a new culture does not necessarily threaten one's cultural identity and lead to conformity to the target culture; knowing a new culture is also a process of reflecting on one's own culture that has been taken for granted, becoming conscious of one's identity and gaining some sense of control over it. This is the idea proposed by advocates of raising language learners' intercultural awareness such as Fenner (2000, 2008) and McKay (2002). As Fenner (2008) puts it below, communication is essential in the process of raising intercultural awareness:

Intercultural awareness can [...] 'be seen as an interdependent relationship between cultures which constitutes a dynamic enrichment for self as well as the other' (Fenner, 2000, p. 149). Communication is an open-ended process dependent on the context and the situation in which the communication takes place. Without knowledge and understanding of both native and target cultures, intercultural communication is hardly possible. Communicating with the other means entering into a dialogue where one has to be willing to adjust one's own attitudes and perspectives to understand the other, even if a complete understanding can never be achieved (Fenner, 2000; Rommetveit, 1992).

Fenner (2008:277-8)

When faced with their incomprehension of humour in the playback and discussion sessions, some of my participants reacted passively: in Group J's discussion of Extract 4 'good news and better news', 'British humour' became something they were incapable of comprehending (§6.2.2), so they could give up making effort to understand it. This

suggested the end of communication. As a result, the Chinese students lost an opportunity to reflect on teachers' self-deprecation they had experienced back home, and the underlying power relation between teachers and learners, which was not necessarily a given and unchallengeable.

Intercultural communication does not always lead to cultural integration (ibid.), but it is hard to imagine how integration can be achieved without communication. Gu (2009) and Tian and Lowe (2009) found that the Chinese students in their studies continued socialising mainly with Chinese friends throughout their stay in Britain, but made adaptations in many other aspects of their living and studying. A similar observation was raised by some of my lecturer participants. So it seems that Chinese students in Britain tend to opt out of intercultural communication and integration. If they choose to believe that knowing new cultures including humour is unnecessary and academic study is the only important thing, one question which Chinese students should ask may be why they need to travel so far away from home to study in Britain.

One convincing answer to this question would be that the academic subjects and teaching quality provided by British universities are unique or considerably superior to Chinese universities. But this may not reflect the reality (many other countries provide equally high quality teaching). It is not my intention in this thesis, nor do I have space, to explore this question fully, but hopefully my findings may provoke discussions and reflection among Chinese students and academic scholars. To sum up, my study revealed the tendency for Chinese students in Britain to emphasise academic study, but dismiss interpersonal and cultural interaction as involved in humour. This view is in line with the current ELF movement towards separating culture from the English language.

#### **7.2.4. Implications for the internationalisation of British higher education**

Internationalisation, which is often envisaged by academic and administrative staff of British universities as the expansion of international student numbers on campuses, has been a buzzword in British higher education in recent years (Robson and Turner, 2007; Toyoshima, 2007). The number of international students studying in British universities has increased steadily in recent years, but various studies show that there are evident gaps between the expectations of teaching and learning held by the department staff and their international students (cf. Edwards and An, 2006; Gu, 2009; Tian and Lowe, 2009; Toyoshima, 2007). My findings are in line with that of these studies. My Chinese participants had difficulty understanding their lecturers' humour. In some examples, the Chinese students were alienated by the experience of not being able to understand why other students were laughing in class. Nevertheless, the lecturers in my study were often unaware of their Chinese students' problems, and some were insensitive to the negative emotions that might be caused by humour.

Interestingly, in the interviews, all of the lecturers expressed awareness of their international students who might have different needs than British students. Some even accounted for how they had taken the international students into consideration in teaching including use of humour (see Eric's interview data in §6.1.2). Furthermore, perceptions of humour diverged not only between the Chinese students and their British lecturers, but between the latter and some British students (e.g. Derek's account of Extract 5 'the Al Yamamah deal' in §6.2.3 was to some extent different from Eric's). Humour, like most utterances, generates different perceptions. Even if the lecturers believed they had considered their Chinese students' needs, different interpretations of humour would still emerge among these participants. This does not mean that humour should be therefore

avoided in lectures. Firstly, there were examples of humour in my data which successfully functioned to facilitate teaching and benefit teacher-student rapport, e.g. Extract 1 'a strong form of integrative motivation'. Secondly, insufficient understanding of humour did not necessarily stop a participant from appreciating it: humour still functioned to bond in some of Andy's episodes even if it was not fully understood by the participants (§6.2.1). So humour's benefits in the lectures were also evident.

Humour of certain qualities appeared to be particularly problematic to the Chinese students in my data. These included the lecturer's self-deprecation, irony, and interactive humour between the lecturer and some students (such as the 'game' in Extract 4 'good news and better news' in §5.3.1). Lecturers of Chinese students need to be cautious in their uses of humour of these kinds. Explicit cues of humour or explanations may be needed on such occasions. In addition, as I explained at the end of §7.2.2, humour comprehension appeared to be influenced by social factors including the students' perceptions of the lecturer and their degree of satisfaction with the department. In this respect, how well Chinese students can share their lecturers' and other departmental staff's humour and laughter can be treated as a sign of their overall level of satisfaction with the department. To improve their Chinese students' experience overseas, British academic departments can include in their staff training humour-related issues. So it is not only down to the students to make adjustments to their study and life in Britain. Academic staff should raise their intercultural awareness as well.

A more general implication my study has for the internationalisation of British universities is derived from the issues noticed in the particular department discussed in §6.2.3, a business school in which Eric, Lynn, and the students in Groups F and J resided. This department had set up collaborations with a few universities in China, and had a large and

increasing number of Chinese students. Despite its rapidly expanding number of international students, it was suffering from a typical issue emerging in the internationalisation of British higher education as raised by Robson and Turner (2007) and Toyoshima (2007): tangible expansion of the number of international students has not led to intangible changes in terms of intercultural understanding or exchanges of knowledge. Many university staff and administrators in the two studies admitted that their internationalisation was mainly driven by the profit that the international students brought, and enrolment requirements were often lowered to attract more students. The business school in my study was undergoing internationalisation in very similar ways. The students arriving with lower qualifications strove to deal with their study, and consequently their social and emotional needs were largely neglected by the department and, in fact, sometimes by themselves. There was an on-going tension between the faculty and the Chinese students. The staff were not satisfied with the Chinese students' English proficiency, and their being inactive in lectures and seminars, while my Chinese participants complained about a lack of support from the department.

Problems pertaining to incomprehension of humour in this department were common and serious as can be seen from my discussion in Chapter 6. The students, especially those in Groups F and J, had evident difficulty understanding their lecturers' humour, and subsequently felt alienated. Yet they considered humour in the lectures to be unimportant. On the other hand, the British lecturers were unaware of and insensitive to the Chinese students' problems: cultural allusions were made with little explanation; business examples were predominately British or European; none of the lecturers mentioned in the interviews that the Chinese students were not sharing their humour. This thesis revealed both pros and cons of using humour in lectures. Staff at British universities need to be aware of and

carefully consider these pros and cons in communication with international students if they want to care for the latter's social and emotional needs. It should be stressed that the findings of this thesis do not suggest that humour should be avoided in British lectures or other academic contexts where international students are present. Humour is an inevitable part of human life, and its understanding should be openly talked about. It may be therefore a reasonable suggestion that incomprehension of humour in intercultural academic contexts should be treated not just as a problem, but a resource of topics in conversations and negotiations.

To sum up, through understanding more about humour in lectures, this thesis has also generated more questions about the humour and humour in general for future enquiries.

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# **Appendix 1. Informed consent for research participants**

## **(lecturers)**

### INFORMED CONSENT FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS (LECTURERS)

OPEN UNIVERSITY

Researcher: Yu Wang

Supervisors: Prof. Guy Cook

Ms. Joan Swann

Thank you for agreeing to take part in my research. I am attaching, for information, some details of the project. Could you please read the paragraphs on this page and, if you are happy with this, add your signature and date at the bottom.

I will audio record one or two of your lectures, and conduct one follow up interview after the lectures. This interview will also be audio recorded. The audio files will be stored in compliance with the Open University guidelines for data security. Access to the audio files will be limited to the researcher and her supervisors. Additionally, selected extracts will be shown to two external coders to code the data. Any information you provide will be kept confidential and will be used for research purposes only. I will use pseudonyms in any documents and records; names and other facts that might reveal the participant's identity will not appear when I present this study or publish its results. Transcriptions and short audio extracts with no identifying information may be presented in the contexts of scholarly publications, academic symposia, university classes, and professional training activities. However, there is the possibility that the participants may be recognised by voice on the audio recordings by colleagues and students when small extracts are played in the



above contexts. All the data will be kept after the study for the future use for research purposes only. I will continue to protect the confidentiality of the data and will not make them available to other researchers not involved in the current study.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation in the project at any time without prejudice. Benefits to all involved will result from the general dissemination of the findings about classroom discourse.

If you have any queries about the project, you may contact the researcher at:

Email: [y.wang@open.ac.uk](mailto:y.wang@open.ac.uk)

Tel: 01908 655 906

07737 562 611

Address: Level 3, Stuart Hall, CREET, the Open University, Walton  
Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, United Kingdom

"I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the procedure and I have received a copy of this description."

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **Appendix 2. Informed consent for research participants (students)**

### **INFORMED CONSENT FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS (STUDENTS)**

OPEN UNIVERSITY

Researcher: Yu Wang

Supervisors: Prof. Guy Cook

Ms. Joan Swann

Thank you for agreeing to take part in my research. I am attaching, for information, some details of the project. Could you please read the paragraphs on this page and, if you are happy with this, add your signature and date at the bottom.

You will be invited to a playback session where you will listen to extracts of the lectures and make comments about their understanding. After that you will discuss some given questions with other participants; I will audio record the discussion. The audio files will be stored in compliance with the Open University guidelines for data security. Access to the audio files will be limited to the researcher and her supervisors. Additionally, selected extracts will be shown to two external coders to code the data. Any information you provide will be kept confidential and will be used for research purposes only. I will use pseudonyms in any documents and records; names and other facts that might reveal the participant's identity will not appear when I present this study or publish its results.

Transcriptions and short audio extracts with no identifying information may be presented in the contexts of scholarly publications, academic symposia, university classes, and professional training activities. However, there is the possibility that the participants may

be recognised by voice on the audio recordings by colleagues and tutors when small extracts are played in the above contexts. All the data will be kept after the study for the future use for research purposes only. I will continue to protect the confidentiality of the data and will not make them available to other researchers not involved in the current study.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation in the project at any time without prejudice. Benefits to all involved will result from the general dissemination of the findings about classroom discourse.

If you have any queries about the project, you may contact the researcher at:

Email: [y.wang@open.ac.uk](mailto:y.wang@open.ac.uk)

Tel: 01908 655 906

07737 562 611

Address: Level 3, Stuart Hall, CREET, the Open University, Walton  
Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, United Kingdom

<p>"I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the procedure and I have received a copy of this description."</p>	
<p>_____ Signature</p>	<p>_____</p>

Name

Date

## Appendix 3. Respondent's report form

Name:		
Age:		
Gender:		
Nationality:		
Degree and subject of study:		
Duration you have been in Britain:	Year(s)	Month(s)

Audio extract no.

Please briefly summarise what the lecturer said in the audio extract:

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Did you notice any instances of humour in what the lecturer said or did?      Yes ☐ No ☐

If yes, please answer the following questions; if no, you don't need to write anything.

Did you feel that the humour was spontaneous or planned?      Spontaneous ☐ Planned ☐

How funny did you find the humour?      Very funny ☐ Slightly funny ☐ Not funny ☐

Can you explain what was humorous?

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## **Appendix 4. Cue card for lecturers**

Can you describe what was happening in this extract?

Do you see any instances of humour in this extract? If so, can you identify what was humorous?

If you see an instance of humour, was it prepared or spontaneous? Was it your own creation or did you learn it from somewhere else? Was it the first time you used this humour?

How did you feel about the students' reaction to the humour?

## Appendix 5. Humour episodes in Chapters 5 and 6

Extract 1 - a strong form of integrative motivation

- 1 Amy: a very strong form of integrative motivation obviously is to fall in love,  
2 with someone who speaks that language
- 3 SS: <laughter>
- 4 Amy: Cuz clearly then, you'll be very motivated, to master the language
- 5 SS: <laughter>
- 6 Amy: because you very much want to share your life with that person
- 7 SM: (inaudible)
- 8 SS: [<laughter>
- 9 Amy: [And yeah <laughter> I am not sure if anyone's speaking from experience here
- 10 SS: <laughter>
- 11 Amy: And it's quite interesting in the 1970s there was, a sort of, urm series of  
12 research case studies done called good language learners studies in Canada and  
13 they had these case studies of very successful language learners and there was one  
14 particular case I remember I can't remember the name of the participant, but it  
15 was a he, a man of course and he was multi-lingual he has mastered many  
16 languages and when they investigated his case so they discovered that he had had  
17 a native speaker girlfriend for every language [that he mastered
- 18 SS: [<laughter>
- 19 Amy: So clearly it shows that yes this strong form of integrative motivation can  
20 work very well, but, and the problem was that this particular tradition of research  
21 didn't really have very practical advice for teachers, cuz there's not much there  
22 to say to students okay well find a native speaker [girlfriend or boyfriend you know
- 23 SS: [<laughter>

24 Amy: It doesn't really translate into any suggestions of what teachers can do, and  
25 so this whole tradition which was very active for thirty years or so, um it was very  
26 theoretical it was theoretical um sort of tradition and it suggested that integrative  
27 motivation give, leads to successful learning but it didn't really have any practical  
28 advice for teachers

Amy1-HE08

## Extract 2 - an Englishman in a karaoke bar

1 Eric: I was talking to someone who was trying to do busi- well he was successfully  
2 doing business in China, but it was the first time he's never been to China before,  
3 he's a member of my family actually and he was in China, and he went alone and he  
4 went to the meeting, and there was about ten people in the room which was not  
5 what he expected, and he sat down and he made his presentation and they went no,  
6 and they made a counter offer which was frankly ridiculous and he went, no, and  
7 most of the day this kind of situation moves backwards and forwards really only  
8 three people doing the talking the others are just sitting there, the second day looked  
9 very much like the first day and he was, not understanding what was happening, not  
10 sure what was going on, and the third day the last day he actually said, I didn't see  
11 any point in going, I thought I might just after all go to the airport and get a plane  
12 back it's not going to happen, but my flight was booked for the following day so hey  
13 I went anyway, and he went in and then he, went to the same position he was in,  
14 the previous day and said that's, the best we can do, and one person at the end of  
15 the table who had never spoken at all said something in Chinese and everybody  
16 relaxed everybody shook everybody else's hand everybody shook his hand the deal  
17 had been done the guy who hadn't spoken for two days was the boss, perhaps for  
18 some of you in the room that doesn't sound odd # for him this was just nothing he  
19 had met before it was a classic difference in culture, both sides were doing things



20 as they saw and as they would do just differently  
21 the better part of the story is the manager the boss came to him afterwards shook  
22 his hand, and he thought he said, okay, and he said yes my # cousin yes and the boss  
23 said tonight, actually he hadn't said okay, what he actually said was karaoke  
24 <laugh>, and my cousin had just agreed to spend a night in a Chinese karaoke bar  
25 (I pushed) he said he will not tell me what he'd sung cuz he said he can't remember,  
26 and I believe him he probably couldn't remember he said it was a very good evening  
27 <laugh> and it's a way of doing business, which was different to that which he'd  
28 used to, he left with very fond memory he likes the place very much and he had a  
29 lot of fun with the people once the deal was done he <laughing voice> got on </> but  
30 to begin with he was completely thrown

Eric1-HE03

### Extract 3 - a telephone conversation

(This extract was not used in the playback and discussion sessions)

1 John: Opening gambits, closing gambits, that's quite difficult you know if you think  
2 how complicated that it is to finish, even a telephone conversation, let's imagine,  
3 that I am going to meet Becky tonight okay? So we have a telephone conversation,  
4 can we meet at five o'clock tonight or this afternoon  
5 Becky: sorry I need to wash my hair  
6 SS: SS: [<laughter>  
7 John: [Oh <laughter> <laughing voice> you need to wash your hair </>  
8 <laughter> I want you to accept this time # it's a tutorial so can we meet for a  
9 tutorial at five o'clock  
10 Becky: ur yes  
11 John: Okay then good, right then so five o'clock tonight then

12 Becky: ur okay see you  
13 John: Yeah see you bye bye  
14 Becky: bye bye  
15 John: Okay, so that's quite complicated because, five o'clock is that okay yeah good  
16 see you then yeah see you bye bye, but, if I, let's try it again, can we meet at five  
17 o'clock tonight? <in low voice to Becky> yes </>  
18 Becky: ur yes  
19 John: Okay bye  
20 SS: <laughter>  
21 John: It's a bit rude isn't it it seems a bit abrupt, so, it's quite skilful to manage  
22 entering and leaving

John1-HE11

#### Extract 4 - good news and better news

1 Eric: Some of you might have been thinking it was Carla this morning on, Economics,  
2 well the good news is, you get Carla next week, and the better news is, ready for  
3 the- I will listen for the cheers, this is the last formal lecture you get from me on this  
4 subject  
5 SF: woo-hoo::  
6 Eric: You cheered  
7 SL: [<laughter>  
8 SF: [(inaudible)  
9 Eric: Oh dear <clears throat>  
10 S?: (inaudible)  
11 Eric: black mark? you're joking, that's twenty percent off her essay  
12 SF: [oh::  
13 SS: [<laughter>

14 Eric: <laugh> # five percent for optimism <laugh> right okay

Eric2-HE02

#### Extract 5 - the Al Yamamah deal

1 Eric: So, to go back to the very first lecture what is international business I am  
2 still not going to offer you a simple definition because there isn't one but I hope by  
3 now you're beginning to see what it actually is and why there is no one simple  
4 definition, at which point my voice is just about to completely disappear and you are  
5 going to tell me all the things you discovered last week about countertrade and  
6 the Al Yamamah deal <laugh> aren't you I am looking forward to this cuz then you  
7 can do the talking

Eric1-HE09

#### Extract 6 - sales people in the U.K.

1 Lynn: so what I want you to think about sales people are not the best loved, people  
2 in the UK market, so I want you to sort of just- consider it in just fifteen  
3 minutes, just that I want you to think about used car sales people pension pension  
4 pension, double glazing, people time share you might have been approached by time  
5 share, estate agents, and what I want you to think about is to, I want you to consider  
6 those industries and debate, this part believes that sales people are only interested in  
7 their own gain and they're essentially unethical, do you believe that, do you agree  
8 with that, it's only a few so called marketing focus companies who pay lip service to  
9 ethics and corporate social responsibility

Lynn1:2-HE1

#### Extract 7 - how to break bad news

(This extract includes Andy2 HEs23-27. Only HE24 and HE26 were used in the playback and discussion sessions due to the time limit.)

1 Andy: okay I've got to tell you, you failed your assignment  
2 SS: <laughter>  
3 Andy: how do I do that, I don't come up to you and say hey you failed  
4 your assignment, how do I do it  
5 SF1: you start with something before you tell me the result you may chat with me  
6 Andy: okay first I work up to it good thank you, sorry how do I work up to it  
7 SM1: I think you may start with something good first  
8 Andy: okay  
9 SM1: well the weather is good today  
10 Andy: uh but you failed your assignment  
11 SS: <laughter>  
12 Andy: hey the weather is good today but you failed your assignment,  
13 so don't worry, the good news and the bad news you know  
14 S?: <laughter>  
15 Andy: yeah, <laughing voice> I like that </> yeah I like that one,  
16 I'll try that, but no you're absolutely right, yeah you work up to it  
17 you don't suddenly introduce it

Andy2-HE23

18 SF2: the teacher may ask some questions about your daily (reviewing) or  
19 Andy: uh you may ask some questions, okay suppose I am getting ont-  
20 you're abso- you've got some interesting points there, when I'm actually getting to  
21 tell you, and this is the interesting thing, how do I minim- suppose you haven't failed,  
22 suppose you've got a D or something you know A B C D E, suppose you've got a  
23 D, alright, what do I do to make it telling you easier, does anyone know?  
24 SF3: urm  
25 Andy: Sorry okay yeah #

26 SF3: I may, I have to explain to you that it is not my responsibility to make this  
27 decision  
28 SS: <laughter>  
29 Andy: okay  
30 SF3: so-  
31 Andy: that's a good one yeah  
32 SS: <laughter>  
33 Andy: I'm sorry, I like that yeah, this is a terrible thing, I marked your paper  
34 but they MADE ME they MADE ME, AY FAIL IT FAIL IT, okay I will fail it  
35 SS: <laughter>  
36 Andy: no I know you- one thing you do is you try to distance yourself  
37 SF3: I (understand that I understand that), it's not my decision  
38 Andy: yeah  
39 SF3: it is a rule  
40 Andy: that's right, it distances you from the decision that's true, yeah

Andy2-HE24

41 SF1: For example, I mean urm, what do you want, the good news or the bad news  
42 Andy: I <laughter>  
43 SS: <laughter>  
44 SF1: (??) give me the good news, you have passed <laugh>  
45 Andy: Okay, and the bad news, you've only got a D yeah, or if you fail, do you  
46 want the good news or the bad news, and you'll say give me the good news you  
47 are going to get lots of writing practice why cause you've failed your assignment  
48 you are going to write  
49 SS: <laughter>  
50 Andy: Now, but no, what actually happens if we can, and this is where preference

51 comes in, that what actually Sacks noticed he said, have you noticed, if it's bad  
52 news if it's seriously bad news you don't actually tell the bad news, you try to get  
53 the other person to tell you the bad news, and it works through preference and  
54 it works like this, I try to get you to guess, what you've got, and, the preferred  
55 answer is that you guess worse than the result, and the dispreferred answer is  
56 you guess better, it would work like this, you don't mind I take you as an ex-

Andy2-HE25

57 SF5: I # I guess maybe the teacher will ask how do you think of the-

58 Andy: That's right I might say to you, first of all, what you said I would preface it  
59 with some chat, and I would sit you down, and you know <lowers voice> nice  
60 weather </> whatever, and then I would # it's urm yeah it's urm and then I  
61 approach it generally, <lowers voice> it's about your assignments, you know </>

62 SS: <laughter>

63 Andy: And then you know it's not going to be good, and you went OH-

Andy2-HE26

64 Andy: sorry yeah

65 SF6: if it's bad news, usually the teachers they do like, you know,  
66 your work was [(inaudible overlap)]

67 Andy: [Yeah

68 SF6: but

69 Andy: but

70 SF6: then you could say that it was not so good

71 Andy: Not so good, yes so that's one way of doing it, that you actually balance it  
72 and that's used in written feedback a lot or spoken formally, but if I- imagine  
73 I am just using this assignment, but imagine it's something else, but you're right,  
74 you would, that might come afterwards, but initially what would I do is to give you

75 the signal this is bad news so you know you sit you down,  
76 <lowers voice quality> it's about your assignment </>, and and urm, and then you  
77 would guess, OH NO I FAIL, that's what I want you to do, that's what I want  
78 you to do, cause then I can say, no no no you haven't failed, and then you are  
79 going to go up, I don't want you to say uh no I haven't got an A, I haven't got an  
80 A have I  
81 SS: <laughter>  
82 Andy: That's not what I want you to do you know, if you do that, it's ur mm,  
83 but with any luck, uh uh I failed no no you haven't failed, oh thank heavens for  
84 that, I suppose an E is okay actually you are almost there, actually you got a D so  
85 it wasn't too bad at all, was it and then you know you have it with these good bits  
86 and these bad bits  
87 SS: <laughter>

Andy2-HE27

#### Extract 8 - mutator

1 Andy: I mean, these are just things I got very quickly and if you combine them you  
2 get a massively rich set of potential ways of giving feedback, so, what I ask you to  
3 do was of course completely unfair, I gave you a text and said mark it and nobody  
4 was going to sit there and say no, so you had to do it, and of course what we've  
5 learned through research is that really you need to use your options, and this is from  
6 Furneaux et al.'s research, some feedback options, "the teacher could be an initiator  
7 a supporter an adviser a suggester a provider and a mutator", changer, I like the  
8 mutator, I don't know if I ever mutated a student in my life but you know I am  
9 prepared to try it so there you go so what's happened in terms of writing research is  
10 that, feedback has become embodied in the process and the teacher's role has been  
11 rethought in all sorts of ways students have been much involved in that by the way

12 the website is okay now I checked it all out and today this week's lecture is already  
13 up on it

Andy1-HE44

#### Extract 9 - woo

(This extract was not used in the playback and discussion sessions)

1 John: So pronunciation can be a can be a problem and ur pronunciation is one area  
2 especially where, in my opinion, we can identify particular difficulties in particular  
3 mother tongues, so you said th is difficult  
4 SF1: because in Chinese  
5 John: Yes  
6 SF1: we don't have that sound  
7 John: Alright yeah so, I think it's ur is it called constructive analysis can be quite useful  
8 there, I know sometimes # wo is difficult to WOman or WOlf, I always enjoy  
9 teaching that because you have to tell the students woo woo <laughter>  
10 SS: <laughter>  
11 John: Come on woo <laughter> woo: <laughing voice> put your lips together </> let's all  
12 do it together woo [woo: woo: woo:  
13 SS: [woo: woo: woo: <laughter>  
14 John: Well it makes me laugh anyway <laughter>  
15 SS: <laughter>

John1:HE16

#### Extract 10 - mark it anyway you want

1 Andy: Your task, your task is to imagine that you've just received this from a  
2 S1: Student  
3 Andy: An advanced of yeah student yeah, not me, urm



- 4 SS: <laughter>
- 5 Andy: You know advance upper-intermediate type of student you've just been
- 6 talking about urm television and its functions you've given them an essay, and this
- 7 has been handed in, and now you have to mark it, so I leave you, ladies and
- 8 gentlemen to mark it there's no right and wrong on this mark it anyway you want I
- 9 will not collect them in, this is entirely anonymous mark them ANYWAY YOU
- 10 WANT, and then we'll go on the feedback
- 11 S2: What's the highest mark
- 12 S3: (inaudible)
- 13 Andy: Yeah, I don't care, highest mark lowest mark
- 14 S3: Ten?
- 15 Andy: I don't know, you do what you want, write anything you want on it, write
- 16 nothing on it I don't care, but, do what you would normally do when you're marking
- 17 an assignment, when in my case would be just throw it up in the air and say okay,
- 18 A-, B-, <cough> sorry
- 19 <Students start reading and marking the essay>
- 20 Andy: <whistles>

Andy1-HE26

#### Extract 11 - dogs' meeting

- 1 Eric: In fact, if you watch, two dogs meeting, watch the culture of dog, the language the
- 2 way they behave and how they negotiate with each other and that's interesting
- 3 because funnily enough they are much better than us that's international
- 4 <laughing voice> we </>, we're stuck with national cultures they are much more
- 5 advanced than us international cultures they behave the same way all over the world,
- 6 it's another form of culture so right from very primitive notions of culture these

## Extract 12 - learning to ride a bicycle

- 1 Amy: Let me give you an example from my own childhood, when I was about I  
2 think it was in my sixth birthday, for my sixth birthday I got a bicycle okay, one of  
3 those proper bicycle before that I had a tricycle you know three wheels, this was  
4 my first real bicycle, but I think of course as a child bicycle it had two little what we  
5 call the training wheels, or the [stabilisers  
6 S: [stabilisers yeah  
7 Amy: at the back okay, but because I was a very determined child and, and because  
8 my brother is a bit older than me and he could already ride his bicycle, so I was very  
9 determined that anything my brother can do of course I can do just as well, so I ask  
10 my father to take off the two stabilisers two training wheels, cause I was determined  
11 that I would learn how to ride this bicycle straight away, and we lived in a house in  
12 in (name of place), and it had a nice and big garden in the back with nice and soft  
13 grass okay a lawn, and so I took my bicycle into the back garden, cause I knew that  
14 even if I fell off the bicycle on the grass I wouldn't really hurt myself, and so I  
15 started to try to learn how to ride this bicycle and I was very autonomous I didn't  
16 want anybody to help me, cause my father wanted to steady the bike for me and so  
17 on so that I wouldn't fall off but, I was determined I didn't want any help any (stuff)  
18 for me I just wanted to you know how to do- so I was very intrinsically motivated  
19 because this was a challenge for me I really wanted to do this myself, and so I  
20 started to try to learn how to ride this bicycle and of course I fell off, quite a few  
21 times but, I just fell off onto the grass it didn't hurt so I just got back on and tried to  
22 learn how to ride it and of course every time I fell off my brother who was watching  
23 with laugh

24 SS: <laughter>

25 Amy: And my mother of course is quite worried cause she thought I might hurt myself,  
 26 but eventually # you know, after a while by the end of the afternoon I have mastered,  
 27 the art of how to ride a bicycle and I could go round and round the garden perfectly  
 28 well balanced you see I was really proud of myself I can remember even now, how  
 29 proud I was at the time, but then later that evening when I was having a bath,  
 30 my mother just came to check me and she was horrified, because I was covered  
 31 in bruises

32 SS: <laughter>

33 Amy: And we counted twenty four bruises, and this was a time in Ireland and also in  
 34 Britain I suppose as well where there was a lot talk in the news, in the media about  
 35 what they were calling battered children

36 SS: <laughter>

37 Amy: In other words children who have been beaten by their parents

38 SS: <laughter>

39 Amy: So my parents were quite worried about sending me to school the next day  
 40 because somebody would probably notice all the bruises

41 SS: <laughter>

Amy1-HE09

### Extract 13 - look forward to assignments

1 Amy: So they need to have developed that metacognitive capacity that ability to think  
 2 about how to learn and how to continue developing their skills, cause I think all of  
 3 you, probably having come here to <name of university> to start your MAs here are  
 4 experiencing that because all of you are very proficient users of English, but clearly,  
 5 taking this MA course here means that you are having to engage with perhaps  
 6 some new vocabulary, as you take the different modules like psychology and text

7 and discourse and so on you are, meaning a lot of new language new concepts or  
8 different definitions of familiar terms and so on, so you are having to continue to  
9 develop your knowledge of English language, and clearly also you are having to do  
10 a lot more reading perhaps some you used to and also when it comes to the module  
11 assignment which I know you are looking forward to writing so much, clearly you  
12 know you'll clearly need some of the- will need to develop your academic writing  
13 skills, so there is a sense in which all of us all of you are still continuing to develop  
14 your skills and continue learning in response to these changing needs and  
15 circumstances now that you are here doing an MA in the UK

Amy1-HE03

Extract 14 - ".hhh."

1 SM1: excuse me  
2 Andy: Yeah  
3 SM1: What's that dot h h h?  
4 Andy: It's the ".hhh", sorry thank you, and if you don't put the dot it's hhh, so if you wanted  
5 sort of breathing you go dot hhh hhh dot hhh, that would be ".hhh hhh.hhh"  
6 SS: <laughter>  
7 Andy: You can do it in conversation analysis, so that's a "hhh!" that's a "hhh!" Cause it's  
8 got exclamation mark, it's not it- <mobile phone rings> oh sorry  
9 SS: <laughter>  
10 Andy: I said nobody ever rings me, <takes out mobile phone from pocket and presses  
11 button> well it's not ringing now, okay sorry about that, so, yeah, carry on with the  
12 things <laugh> I said no one ever rings me and I get a phone call, dear oh dear

Andy2-HE16

## Extract 15 - nothing comes from nothing

- 1 John: I was thinking last night about, you know where does speaking come from you  
2 know, urm there's a Shakespeare line nothing comes from nothing have you heard  
3 of that? does anybody know which play that comes from? no?
- 4 S: (inaudible)
- 5 John: no no well it's it's
- 6 S: (inaudible)
- 7 John: no no, it's from- Amy will tell us
- 8 SS: <laughter>
- 9 Amy: (inaudible)
- 10 John: <laughter> no it's King Lear asks his daughters, if they have anything to say about  
11 how much do you love me and he says to Cordelia, urm tell me you know and he  
12 wants to hear all her affection and her love and she says, I have nothing to say  
13 nothing, and he says nothing comes from nothing, well I suppose with speaking that  
14 has to be some input for speaking and nothing will come from nothing

John1-HE03

## Extract 16 - the spot commands a fine view

- 1 John: We talked about a little bit about input from what we listen to from everyday  
2 conversations from the TV from soap operas, but I wonder what about in your  
3 experience do you ever find that what you've read can turn into what you speak,  
4 do you find that?
- 5 S: yes
- 6 John: Yes yes, it can happen can't it you know that # what we've read does make an  
7 impression on us, we find that we are actually using it, I remember speaking to a #  
8 an excursion once we went on an excursion, and a lady # a Japanese student

9 actually said to me ur this spot commands a fine view, and I thought woo that's very  
10 impressive you know, but I said where did you learn that so she said I read it in a  
11 guide book, the spot commands a fine view, and actually perhaps the register is  
12 <laughing voice> a little bit </> formal, but ur it was interesting that she learned  
13 and she picked out and she's been able to use almost quite appropriately something  
14 that she read, so there are all sorts of inputs that can be turned into speaking

John1-HE09

#### Extract 17 - buy American, buy Toyota

1 Eric: Finally for them, location advantage now in that case the one we're looking at  
2 Toyota or Nissan or Honda, that is the key issue, that is the major decision, is the  
3 location advantage, I've said to you before they market cars in America by saying  
4 buy American buy Toyota, it's sourced there it's made there it's made by American  
5 staff it (gives work-) the American jobs so they say, it's an American car, apparently  
6 the Americans believed them, okay, I notice they don't try that one in Europe,  
7 perhaps we wouldn't believe them I don't know, but in fact, under European law,  
8 that car has to be manufactured with eighty percent of the manufacturer components  
9 coming from within Europe

Eric2-HE06

#### Extract 18 - great delight in marking

1 Eric: Okay that brings this section of what we have been doing to a close, Carla, Victor  
2 and I now have the great delight in marking your essays, anyone who has not done  
3 a turnitin submission will do so before Monday

Eric2-HE07

#### Extract 19 - Tango ad

1 Lynn: does anyone remember the Tango ad, # an advert in the UK for Tango, it was an

2 orange man that went round and said you've been tangoed and then slap the child  
3 across the face  
4 SL: <laughter>  
5 Lynn: so what was happening is people going to school drinking Tango have been hit by  
6 their friends across their faces  
7 SS: <laughter>  
8 Lynn: <laughing voice> so </> so there was loads of complaints to the advertising  
9 standards authority because they thought that was misleading children thought that it  
10 was it was a vulnerable group buying this Tango tangoing their friends # hitting their  
11 <laughing voice> faces </>  
12 SS: <laughter>  
13 Lynn: So they have to go through procedures and the advert was changed (inaudible)  
14 they don't feature the slapping manner

Lynn1-HE09

## Appendix 6. Transcription conventions

Transcription conventions used in this thesis were adapted from those of the BASE corpus.

### For transcripts of BASE and Small Corpus data, interviews, and group discussions

(inaudible)/(??)	Inaudible recording
(text)	Uncertain transcription
<movement> text </>	start and finish of kinesic movements and other nonverbal events
<laugh>	non-iterated laughter
<laughter>	Iterated laughter
[text	Overlapping speech
#	Hesitation or filler sounds
“text”	text read out from or shown on a PowerPoint slide, handout or book
<name>	Anonymous name of a person or organisation
text-	Truncated words
:	prolonged sound

### For transcripts of BASE data only

<laughing/angry/mimicking another's voice> text </>	speaker changes vocal quality
,	brief pause

### For transcripts of Small Corpus data only

<u>text</u>	marked vocal feature, e.g. change of accent, slight rise of tone, etc.
?	rise of tone at the end of a question



<lower voice> text </>

lower voice

TEXT

loud voice

,

brief pause

**For transcripts of Interview and group discussion only**

,

punctuation comma

[...]

content omitted

text

marked vocal feature, e.g. change of accent, slight rise  
of tone, etc.

?

rise of tone at the end of a question

## Appendix 7. Ethics approval



The Open University

From John Oates  
Chair, The Open University Human Participants and  
Materials Research Ethics Committee  
Research School  
Email j.m.oates@open.ac.uk  
Extension 52395

To Pl: Yu Wang, research student, CREET

Subject A study of humour in British academic lectures  
Ref HPMEC/2009/#034/1  
Date 3 October 2009

### Memorandum

This memorandum is to confirm that the research protocol for the above-named research project, as submitted on 24<sup>th</sup> September 2009, is approved by the Open University Human Participants and Materials Ethics Committee, subject to satisfactory responses to the following:

You are asked to:

1. Confirm that you will comply with The Open University guidelines for data security; <https://intranet-gw.open.ac.uk/planning/dp/p9.shtml> and modify the information and consent forms accordingly;
2. Recognise that both lecturers and British students will also be of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds and therefore have different understandings of humour and counter-humour;
3. Take account of instances of humour where others may be laughing but a student may not understand, and consider how such a lack of understanding may influence learning;
4. Ensure that your methodology captures all instances of humour as used by lecturers, including more subtle modes such as irony. You may wish to consider making use of the observations of a collaborator with high level knowledge of such uses of English;
5. Replace or remove 'irresponsive' in the information sheet;
6. Replace in the consent form 'without prejudice' with the phrase 'there will be no negative consequences for you if you decide not to participate in this study'.

At the conclusion of your project, by the date that you stated in your application, the Committee would like to receive a summary report on the progress of this project, any ethical issues that have arisen and how they have been dealt with.

John Oates

Chair, OU HPMEC

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